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"TAKE THAT BOY OUT!" SHOUTED THE GOLD SHARK, LEVELING A VINDICTIVE FINGER AT TONY.

OR,

TONY SHARP on GUARD.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,
AUTHOR OF "FELIX FOX," "PHIL FLASH,"
"FOX AND FALCON," "BRANDED BEN,"
"TWO SHADOWS," "MUTE MERLE,"
"LITTLE LON," THE "DODGER
DICK" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

OLD SKINNER.

It was high noon in New York, and the Gold Exchange was discharging its crowd of well-dressed and excited men. They came out of the building without much regard for order, and theirs was the usual conversation of the hour.

As they hurried away, some to their places of business and others to a hasty lunch, not one noticed a boy who seemed to be somewhat interested in the scene they were making.

"They come away like bees out of a hive," muttered the boy, who was about sixteen, and poorly dressed. "I've seen 'em so day after day, and all they know is money, money, money! He'll be along presently. Sometimes he's a little slow, staying back to take a last look at the ticker, I guess. Ah! here he is, the old duffer! Looks like he could lunch on gold dollars, doesn't he?"

The individual whom the boy was now eyeing was a large person with a coarse, miser-like face. He had heavy eyebrows of grizzly gray, and side-whiskers of the same color. Any one would have taken him for a man with a close-gripping conscience, just the one to grind his fellow-man into the dust at his feet for a few "points."

He edged his way through the crowd of brokers, speaking to none of them, but watched closely by the boy on guard.

As the old fellow moved off, the youth started after him, and, in a little while, was within reaching distance.

Just as he was about to pluck the miser-broker's sleeve, a man brushed past him and whispered something in the old fellow's ears.

"When?" cried the broker, glancing at the other with a quick start.

"Right away," was the answer. "She is waiting for you now. You'll come, eh?"

"I will come."

Already the cheeks of the broker had grown almost colorless. He looked after the man who was vanishing in the crowd, and the boy saw that his hands were clinched.

"I won't stop you now, Old Stephen, but I'll see where you go and who is waiting for you—if I can."

For a moment Stephen Skinner, or "Old Skinner" as he was sometimes called, stood stock still on the sidewalk and let the crowd surge past him.

"I'd like to know how long this is to go on?" he growled, while the keen-eyed boy watched them. "They draw the net tighter and tighter all the time and I'm thoroughly enmeshed now. I'll make a break to-day. Hang me, if I don't set the dogs of vengeance on the gang! I'll show 'em that Old Skinner won't be bled all the time, and when I do turn on 'em, I'll twist their necks in a way that'll be beautiful."

With this he moved off, followed by his little watcher at a respectful distance.

The old man—he was sixty if a day—was quick on foot, and his long and busy life had made him familiar with the streets of New York.

He knew the short cuts to various quarters and the boy, therefore, was not surprised to see him dart into the narrowest streets—until, finally he entered a large building designed, as it appeared, for numerous families—a tenement-house.

"So she is there!" exclaimed the young shadow. "Old Skinner would rather have stayed away but somebody who has a grip on him gave the screw another twist and here he is!"

If he could have followed the broker he would have seen him mount a dingy stair to the third floor where he turned to the right and walked straight to a door on which he knocked.

"Come in!" called out a voice inside.

Old Skinner opened the door and found himself face to face with a woman of thirty.

She was dressed better than her surroundings warranted, and the moment she saw the broker her black eyes emitted a flash of triumph, and a smile wreathed her lips.

"What is it now?" demanded the old man crustily and out of humor.

"Don't go off like a pound of powder," answered the woman, her smile broadening while she spoke. "So Jack found you?"

"I wouldn't be here if he had not."

"Just so. Well, Jack is a good one."

There was no reply to this.

"I'm in a little strait," continued the woman, looking at the broker again. "I was robbed last night—"

"You robbed?" broke forth the old man, contemptuously.

"Yes. I see you don't want to believe it; but it is true, and I come to you for a little assistance. Jack is trying to track the rascal. He is good on the trail, and would make a first-class detective with a little practice, but," with another smile that puzzled the broker, "Jack will never join the professionals."

Old Stephen grew impatient. He evidently wanted the interview over as soon as possible. He twisted uneasily in the chair he had taken,

and consulted the watch which he jerked savagely from his pocket.

"I want a thousand," continued the woman, at the same time putting up a shapely hand, on which glittered a fine ring, whose crest was a serpent's head, with two precious stones for eyes.

Old Skinner fell back and stared at her.

Now was the time for him to carry out the spirit he had manifested while talking to himself. He now had an excellent opportunity for resisting the cool scheme of blackmail which the woman was playing, with all the cunning of the accomplished adventurer.

"I am going away," resumed she. "I have been called out of the city, and it is very important that I should have one thousand dollars right now."

"When are you coming back?"

Under the circumstances Old Skinner's question was the most natural one in the world, but he put it with such mingled anxiety and eagerness that twinkled the woman's eyes with merriment.

"I may never return," she answered.

"You need not say that," put in the miser. "In less than a week you'll be back here bleeding me as usual."

She smiled again, not angrily, but in a pleasant manner.

"You've got a good deal of blood left for a person who has been bled," she responded, looking Old Skinner over from head to foot.

"I won't have it long if you keep on applying your suckers. I believe I'll quit submitting now."

"Just as you like," was the reply, uttered with an apparent indifference that galled the old man. "You have the whole say in this matter. If you want to cut loose from us I'll even lend you the knife. But you must take the consequences."

She watched him as the color came and went on his face, and waited for him to speak.

"How much did you say you wanted?" he asked.

"One thousand."

Old Skinner bit his lips almost through as he moved his chair to a small table and dived one hand into an inner pocket.

Bringing up a check-book, he next produced a fountain-pen and bent over the table.

As a matter of course he was attentively eyed by the person at his elbow while he filled the check for one thousand dollars, making it payable to Mesa Marx.

When he had dashed his name across the bottom of the check, he held it between thumb and finger and looked at the woman.

"This is the last one, madam," said he. "By the Eternal, I have written your name on a paper of this sort for the last time!"

There was no reply, but the woman took the check from the broker's fingers.

"I'm going to fight all of you from this time on," he continued, with increasing spirit. "You have bled me long enough. I shall call to my aid the powers that suit me best. I tell you to your face that you are the queen of blackmailers, but you and your gang have bled me for the last time. All future demands will be resisted. Not only that, but I will open the doors of Sing Sing for you and the rest. I am tired of this work. You hold in your hand the last hush-money you will ever rake from my coffers. I don't believe a word about your being robbed. Who would rob you I should like to know! You've heard me, woman!" and Old Skinner left his chair and looked down into the calm, upturned face at the table. "From this hour I keep my money. If you make another demand, or if you don't, I'll break your power and make you look at the world through prison bars!"

The old broker's eyes fairly flashed.

"All right, Stephen Skinner. If you can afford to wear a noose for the pleasure of seeing me behind the bars, play the biggest hand you can. It's all one to me, you see. I'm perfectly indifferent," and a wave of the speaker's hand dismissed the broker.

He went down the steps in a dazed condition. His feet did not seem to touch the planks beneath them. He went out into the sunshine with the whitest face among the hundreds there.

All at once he was touched by a hand that made him fall back with a startled cry.

He looked down into the face of the boy who had followed him from the door of the Gold Exchange.

"Go away!" cried Old Skinner. "I told you yesterday that I wouldn't help you. I won't! I won't!"

The boy flushed and drew off.

"I'll make you pay for that answer some day!" cried he.

CHAPTER II.

THE BOY AND HIS MISSION.

OLD SKINNER, looked for a moment at the boy, with an expression of contempt and anger, but he suddenly passed on and got away from the unwholesome vicinity as rapidly as possible.

The boy continued to watch him until he was no longer visible, when he also vanished.

"Did you see him, Tony?" asked a young girl, who greeted the boy when he entered a small and poorly-furnished room, half an hour after the episode on the street.

"Yes, I saw Old Closefist. I tackled him, too," was the response.

"At his house?"

"No, on the street, not a very good place for business, I'll admit, Helen, but I had no other chance."

The countenance of the girl was beautiful, but pale and anxious.

She occupied a rocking-chair, with big, old-fashioned arms, on which reposed her fair white hands. She seemed to have read failure in the boy's face, for, after his communication she looked at him, but did not speak.

"I haven't got good news, continued the boy. "He said just what he got off the other day—that he wouldn't help mother. And he said it in a snarling way, too, just as a wolf shows his teeth when he growls."

"And what did you say, Tony?"

"I told him that he would pay for his answer some day, and he shall! Yes, Helen, I'm going to the bottom of this business. Mother knows just enough to give me a start, and I've been with the detectives enough to know how to run a trail."

The girl leaned back in the chair and looked at her companion with feelings of rising pride.

They were about the same age, probably the girl was the elder, but there was not the resemblance of brother and sister between them.

"The old Gold Shark is in trouble," Tony went on.

"In trouble, Tony?"

"Yes. He went to a place where I know he didn't make a dollar. When he came out of a certain house he looked like he had been fleeced of his last nickel. He was mad. The man who told him on the street that some woman wanted to see him got him in the trap."

"Who was the man?"

"Why, the fellow I told you about the other day—the one I saw in Battery Park trying to rob the little Italian."

"Does he know Stephen Skinner?"

"It seems so. It is no chance acquaintance, either, Helen, for the old shark knew him the moment he set eyes on him, and he went straight to the unknown woman in the big tenement-house."

Helen said nothing, but fell into a deep study.

"Say, Helen!" he urged when the girl looked up again.

"What is it, now, Tony?"

"Mother won't come back from nursing the sick gentleman on the avenue before dark, will she?"

"Not before ten to-night."

"Then I'm going to work."

"What will you do?—go back to Old Skinner and make another appeal?"

"No!" exclaimed the lad, his eyes lighting up indignantly. "I've made my last appeal to the Wall street shark for the present. I don't intend to give him another chance to snuff me out as he seems to like to do. The woman in the tenement has a hold of some kind on him. I want to see her."

"But maybe she won't see you, Tony!"

"We'll find out," laughed the boy. "Stephen Skinner must surrender that which is not legally his own. He reached the position he now occupies over other people's money, and there isn't a meaner rascal in New York, and that's saying a good deal, Helen, for this is a paradise of rogues. I know that mother deems him a cunning, merciless, and cruel old man. He will stoop to anything to hold his own, and if what she knows about his past is true, he knows some slick tricks, and lots of mean ones."

"Mother has felt the old villain's hand," replied the girl with rising spirit that brought a quick flush to her cheeks. "I don't see why some people are permitted to go unpunished so long."

"His day is coming!" broke out the boy. "Old Skinner is nearly at the end of his skein."

"It doesn't look like it, Tony. He owns fifty houses in this city; he makes money hand over fist, day after day, and nobody gets any of it."

"Nobody? You forget what I saw to-day. I tell you that the old vulture came out of the big house on J—street poorer than he went in. If Lionel comes, say nothing."

"Lionel won't come to-day," responded Helen.

"So much the better, for you might tell him something," laughed the boy. "Now, I am going to take a look at the woman who sent for Old Skinner."

"Be careful!" admonished the girl.

"Just as if I would run my head into danger on purpose!"

The afternoon was on the wane when Tony Sharp reappeared on the street.

He immediately started off and soon reached the neighborhood in which he had left Old Skinner some time before.

He was well aware that the large, old-fashioned house was a tenement, though of a respectable kind as compared with some structures like it on other streets. Its occupants were not of that promiscuous sort found too often in the towering human hives of Gotham, and Tony expected to encounter a woman of somewhat stylish appearance on the inside.

He found the hall door open with the last rays of afternoon sunshine on the step, and, just as he was about to enter, was suddenly confronted by a woman in the act of quitting the house.

Something seemed to tell Tony that fortune had brought him face to face with the very person he was seeking.

She was well-dressed, presumably for a walk somewhere, and, as the boy drew back to give her free passage to the sidewalk, he caught sight of her vivacious eyes.

"I don't go further into this house!" decided the boy. "Fortune is doing a good turn for Tony Sharp, and I'm going to follow the woman out."

He remained in the hall long enough to give the suspected person a start and then followed her, at a respectful distance.

"Just as I thought!" he cried at a certain corner several blocks from the tenement. "She has already found the man who wanted to rob the Italian boy and he is the same fellow who whispered to Old Skinner on the street. Now, off they go, both in good humor as if they had pulled all the chestnuts from the fire without burning their fingers."

He dared not go too near the couple thus spotted for it was he who had saved the little Italian's pennies for him and thereby incurred the hatred of the big bluffer who really had attempted to steal them.

Every now and then the silvery laugh of the woman came back to his ears, and he could see that her companion was in like good spirits.

All at once a figure turned a corner between Tony and his prey and stopped within a few feet of him.

It was Old Skinner.

The eyes of the miser broker had suddenly enlarged and a thunder-cloud of rage darkened his brow.

He fixed his gaze on the pair walking leisurely off, and the boy saw him shake his fist at them.

"A race for Sing Sing is it, eh?" grated Old Skinner. "I'll show you for whom the doors of that rogue's rookery open! Since I left you, my lady, I've baited the trap and sharpened the hooks that will catch you and your ally. You bled Old Skinner once too often. The last drop of blood did the business. I'm going to shut my band and when I do somebody will squirm."

Tony Sharp, unperceived by the irate old money-bug, heard every word as the clearly muttered sentences were spoken.

Away he went, and before Tony could decide whom to follow, Old Skinner or the woman and her companion, all three had disappeared.

But, he was not to be outwitted in this manner, and a resumption of the chase he had inaugurated soon brought the twain in sight again.

They led him into one of the numerous little parks of the city, where they spent some time, after which the woman went back to the big house, and Tony returned to Helen to report.

Bright and early the next morning Tony Sharp heard a newsboy's voice on the street:

"All about the murder of 'Old Skinner!'"

The words sent a wild thrill through the young listener's brain, and, in a moment, he was devouring the most exciting item of news he had ever seen.

Sure enough, the miser-broker's time had come.

Some time in the night his house had been entered and plundered!

And the Gold Shark of Wall street murdered besides?

So the paper said.

"Now I have a job!" exclaimed Tony.

CHAPTER III.

A QUEER CASE.

THE Wall street Gold Shark occupied a well-to-do house on a quiet street. It was an old-fashioned structure, which had never been remodeled to keep pace with the times, and suited Old Skinner perfectly.

The broker being a bachelor or widower—no one knew which, for much of his life was a blank to those who knew him—lived alone, with the exception of a deaf servant whom he seldom saw, as he dined at a cheap restaurant in the vicinity.

It was this old woman, as deaf as a post, who had made the discovery of the tragedy which had so startled Tony Sharp, the boy trailer.

When Tony reached the house he found it surrounded by a crowd of eager people. His coming was not noticed, and he elbowed his way to the old steps before he was discovered.

He had heard, time and again, that Old Skinner was murdered, that the coroner was inside trying to extract testimony from the servant, and that the affair was the most mysterious one of the kind known to the oldest inhabitant.

At this juncture the crowd made way for a man who had the appearance of an officer.

Tony knew him on sight, and, as the gentleman reached the step, the boy did not hesitate to pluck his sleeve.

"Here's a go if somebody hasn't twisted the truth," laughed the man who was a detective, as he looked down into the boy's face. "Come right along with me. We'll go in and look at the matter."

Nothing better than this could have suited the lad, and the next moment he entered Old Skinner's house for the first time. In the hall the two encountered a policeman, who had been some time on the scene, and in response to a query by the detective, the sergeant smiled.

"It's not so bad for Old Skinner, after all. He'll be about in a few days fleecing people as usual. Walk right in and look at him."

Tony and the detective passed into a room at one side of the hall and found themselves among a number of people, all of whom the city ferret knew.

Old Skinner sat in an arm-chair with a bandage about his forehead and one arm in a sling.

He did not look very much like a dead man, certainly not like the one described by the newspaper account.

The old servant had told her story several times and without the slightest variation. She had simply found the old broker on his face, on the floor of his little library, unconscious, and apparently dead. He had been attacked by some one, had been beaten about the head and arms, and had, in all probability, been left for dead.

The young doctor who had been summoned had told the reporter that Skinner had but a few moments to live, hence the account which had excited Tony.

The old sinner was in bad humor. He did not like to be questioned, and when he discovered that the man who accompanied the boy was a detective, he grew positively "ugly."

He did not know who had attempted his life. He was asleep in his chair when the attack was made and the first blow which had thrown him into unconsciousness had prevented him from defending himself or recognizing his assailants.

Tony watched the old fellow narrowly, and when he thought himself screened from observation a strong voice rung through the room.

"Take that boy out!" shouted the Gold Shark, leveling a vindictive finger at Tony. "I'd like to know what right he has in this house? I told him that I wouldn't help her, and I won't! Take him out!"

All eyes were turned upon the boy, but no one made a move to obey, whereupon Skinner's rage increased and he would have darted from his chair at Tony if the doctor and the detective had not held him.

By and by the Wall street shark was persuaded to drink part of the contents of a glass, and, in a little while, the house was quite, so far as his tongue was concerned.

This gave Tony and his detective friend, who was known as Burt Boffin, to give some attention to the premises.

The detective made poor headway with the deaf servant, who, owing to her infirmity, was averse to being questioned. Her ear-trumpet was not in working order, and all attempts to converse with her without it were certain to end in failure.

"Don't you think, sir, that Old Skinner is keeping something back?" asked Tony of the detective when the two had partly searched a room adjoining the library.

"I do, indeed," was the reply.

"That is my opinion, exactly," asserted the boy. "The old fellow knows more about his hurts than he wants to tell. In short, he knows who inflicted them, but, for some reason, he is bent on keeping the information back."

It might have been that Tony then thought of Jack and the woman in the old apartment-house. At any rate, he appeared to have good ground for his suspicions.

"He wanted you fired?" smiled the detective.

"Yes."

"He was emphatic, too, I noticed. He doesn't seem to like you, Tony."

The boy colored and a quick flash lit up his eyes.

"And I don't like a hair of Old Skinner's head!" he exclaimed. "He hasn't treated my mother right and the old shark knows it. That's why he wanted to fire me, Mr. Boffin; but, I made up my mind that I would hold my own, even in his own house."

"But, Tony, what do you think?"

Burt Boffin had taken a seat and crossed his legs. He was an experienced detective, who took things coolly, but who sometimes asked other people for their opinion, as he was now asking the boy.

"What is my opinion of this affair, Mr. Boffin?" repeated the boy.

"Yes, that's it."

"Well, I've already expressed some of it. The rest of it is that Old Skinner hasn't lost a dollar!"

The detective broke into a laugh and smote his knee with his palm—a fashion he had. He gave Tony Sharp a singular look.

"He makes a great ado about nothing, then," said he.

"That is true, Mr. Boffin, but, did you notice that he failed to fix the amount of his loss?"

"I did."

"And we have not discovered any losses?"

"Everything seems in its place."

"What then?"

"Why, simply what you have said—the Wall street shark has not been robbed. But," continued the detective, quickly, "there is something back of this—something behind this queer case. Old Skinner did not inflict his injuries on himself."

"No. The old servant says that the door was ajar when she came down stairs."

Burt Boffin sat silent for a moment; then he drew an ivory tablet from his pocket and seemed to make a few notes on it.

"I think we have a starting point, Tony," he remarked. "Let's be off."

As they reached the door leading into Old Skinner's chamber the detective opened it a second and leaned forward.

"Well, this beats me!" he whispered with a glance over his shoulder at the watchful boy.

Tony Sharp sprung forward and put his head beyond the door.

To his own surprise as well as that of the detective's he saw Old Skinner kneeling in one corner of the room with a lamp at his elbow.

It was impossible for the two to see what he was after, for the lamp cast his operations in shadow, but they could conjecture that the old man was up to some devilment.

"A dying man don't go through such antics," muttered the detective. "The skinflint is playing a pretty deep game. Ha! he is through now. By Jove! there's a trap in the floor!"

By this time the old broker had left the corner and was bearing the lamp back to the table. He looked ghastly as the light fell upon his bandaged face, and he walked as one who was very weak.

Detective Burt pulled Tony back and Skinner did not see them ere they closed the door.

"It is just this and nothing else," remarked Boffin to the boy. "The old curmudgeon had one or more callers. We will say two. They gave him the wounds he carries, but he will tell nothing. He did not lose a cent of his wealth though he says he was robbed. Now what does it all mean?"

Before the detective had finished, he had Tony's gaze riveted upon him.

"I think we had better watch Jack and the woman in the big house a spell!" he suddenly cried.

"Mesa Marx, boy, do you mean?"

"Yes, Mesa Marx, or whatever her name is."

"Just what we will do, Master Sharp, but she will play her game just the same," and Burt Boffin looked wise as if he knew the woman.

CHAPTER IV.

TONY AND THE DUDE.

ABOUT the time of the transpiring of these scenes a little ten-by-twelve room on a prominent street that lost itself in Broadway had for an occupant a young man who was well-known by sight to thousands of New Yorkers.

He could not have passed his twenty-second year, though certain wrinkles which told of a life not entirely correct made him look older.

His clothes were expensive and elegant, and from collar to boots there was not a blemish in his apparel.

Mr. Richard Dido, or Dick Dido, as he was commonly called, was a sidewalk ornament on warm days and a theater butterfly at night. He always had plenty of money at his command, though he had never been known to accumulate a dollar by hard work, for, like the lilies of the fields he was the reverse of a toiler.

He dwelt in the little room in which we have just found him, and was to be found there when he was not posing as an Adonis on the street, or getting his bread by the sweat of other people's brows.

On this particular occasion Mr. Dido was blowing cigarette rings toward the ceiling while he was tipped back in his chair with his polished heels higher than his head. He looked wise in a certain way, as if the world was using him very well just then, and he had no reason to complain.

All at once a light rapping caused him to turn his head and glance across the room.

"Come in," said Dick, without taking down his heels, and the door promptly opened.

Before him stood a woman, still young and handsome, with the blackest eyes one would wish to see in a day's journey.

The Broadway masher greeted her with a smile which grew quickly into a light laugh.

His visitor came forward and tapped him on the shoulder with her slender fingers.

"Have you seen the morning papers?" she asked.

"I've just tossed 'em into the waste-basket," answered Dick.

"What do you think?"

"I haven't been doing much thinking since, but I have been trying to enjoy this cigarette. It's the first of a new brand, and the dealer gave me a package on trial, with the understanding that I am to have six dozen for my recommendation."

The semblance of a frown gathered at the corners of the woman's mouth.

"But you haven't heard the latest," she remarked. "I'm sure you haven't."

Dick looked up into her face in a questioning manner.

"What is the latest?" he inquired.

"The old fellow is able to be about."

Dick started and removed his cigarette.

"He is, eh?" he exclaimed. "Where did you get this? On the street?"

"The street isn't my intelligence office," was the response clothed in some spirit. "I happen to know what I'm talking about. The Vulture of Wall street is able to fleece the first man he catches."

"Well, it won't be me!" exclaimed Dick.

His companion gave him a singular look.

"I shall go on as usual," he proceeded. "What do you think I care about the Wall street Vulture, eh, Mesa?" and he smiled in the woman's face.

"I'm glad to see you so contented," she rejoined. "I thought you would like to hear the latest."

"Thanks, of course, for your information, but really since Old Skinner is not as dead as reported I've lost all interest in him."

The woman drew off a little and looked strangely at the Broadway beau. It was apparent that he was a puzzle to her and his cool manners perturbed her not a little.

At one time she seemed on the eve of breaking forth in a passionate display of pique, but she controlled herself in an admirable way.

"They can't get anything out of the old fellow," resumed Mesa.

"There's where he shows his sense," put in Dick.

"He persists that he was robbed, but he will give no particulars. The police are at fault and the best detectives puzzled."

That is better still. Old Skinner will be the lion of the hour when he reappears on the street. I think I shall have to congratulate him. Won't you help me, Mesa?"

"Certainly," laughed the woman showing her white teeth in a way which told that she did not mean it. "He will be at his old post within three days if I have not been wrongly informed."

"And everybody will want to see the old customer who was pronounced dead by the reporters. By George! that's the way to get notoriety, Mesa."

The young man's companion did not smile this time but on the contrary her face grew sober.

"I'm going away," said she with an abruptness that startled Dick Dido.

"When, Mesa?"

"Right off."

"They haven't frightened you, eh?"

"No, not that. But you know I talked of going last week."

"I remember that."

"Well, I am going to-day."

Dick seemed to study her face a few moments, as if there was a covert design behind her declaration.

"While I'm gone you don't want to shadow the young girl," she suddenly went on.

"What girl?"

"The one you've discovered last—the boy's sister."

Dick Dido let slip a sharp whistle.

"Jealous, eh?" he exclaimed, while Mesa flushed.

"Never mind," was the reply. "I mean just what I'm saying. You don't want to persecute her with any attentions."

"If I wouldn't have her brother on my back?"

"I don't mean that, and you know it."

"Come!" cried Dick, touching her arm softly.

"Don't try to cross the river till you come to it. I haven't made love to the girl. Really, I don't so much as know her whole name. They call her Helen, I believe."

"Helen Sharp," exclaimed Mesa. "Her mother is a professional nurse, and the boy, her brother, little more than a gutter-snipe. He hangs round Police Headquarters, and—"

"You seem to know the family."

"I know something about a good many families," returned the woman.

"I believe it."

"Well, good-by," continued Mesa, holding out a hand which Dick Dido took cordially.

"When will I gaze on your beautiful countenance again?" he asked.

"Before long."

"That's very indefinite, but never mind. Shall I hear from you?"

"That depends. Remember: no love-making to the nurse's daughter!"

The young man laughed, and their hands fell apart.

Mesa crossed the room to the door, where she stopped, and looked at him with a glance full of jealous rage.

"If you disobey, I'll make it warm for you!" she said, through her teeth. "I reckon you know enough of me, Richard Dido, to suspect that I carry claws under the velvet. I'm not going so far that I will not be within striking distance."

Then she pulled the door open, passed out, and drew it shut with a bang.

The young man left in the room heard the patter of feet on an unseen stair, and when it had ceased a smile overspread his face.

"I guess I do know that she carries claws under the velvet, and they're said to be sharp ones, too," he chuckled to himself while he lighted another cigarette. "I'm not to look at pretty Helen Sharp because she is jealous. Well, Mesa, if you were to remain in the city you'd probably open your black eyes. I'm of age and my own master, and I know that some good, shrewd playing just at this time will result in a well-filled purse and something else. Don't I know that Helen's brother Tony wants to be a young sleuth? That's why he is in with the police and several professional detectives, especially Burt Boffin, the best of them all. I shan't be surprised to hear that the two are already working up the Old Skinner case. Well, let 'em. No matter how sharp they are, they will find nothing in it for them. The Vulture of Wall street is keeping his mouth shut for a purpose, and he won't pay Boffin and the boy fox a dollar to go to the bottom of this matter. I guess I'm in luck. Mesa gone away and Helen Sharp and the big purse to play for! What more could I ask for?"

Five minutes later Dick Dido emerged from the house in all the glory of his faultless attire, and the warm sunshine caught his pleasant smiles.

He sauntered down the street into Broadway and was soon lost in the surging crowds there.

This time he did not pose as a street ornament, but kept rapidly on till he brought up in a street where he attracted a good deal of attention.

In a little while he was observed by a boy who bounded into a house and seized a young girl by the arm.

"Helen, the band-box rascal is coming again!" he exclaimed.

The girl instantly flushed.

"He shan't come in!" she cried indignantly.

"Yes, he shall, and, what is more, you must receive him cordially. Don't say 'no,' Helen. No matter how much it goes against the grain to be courteous to Dick Dido, the Broadway statue, you must do it. He may not come in this time, but he will before long. Mr. Boffin and I are working up a big case together, and you must smile on Dido to help us along."

Helen Sharp took her brother's hand.

"I'll play with the serpent, Tony," said she. "Let him come on."

CHAPTER V.

A LINK IN THE CHAIN.

MR. RICHARD DIDO did not see fit to invade the house which he eyed with a good deal of curiosity. His manner told that he would have liked to know what was going on beyond its door at that moment, but his passing by showed that he had postponed his call.

Helen Sharp waited for him with her brother Tony in the background.

More than once the Broadway statue had persecuted her with his attentions which were not at all relished by her. Her fair face had attractions for him, and besides there was something of more moment than it back of his wooing.

"I guess he was only reconnoitering the ground, Helen," smiled Tony, when the well-dressed figure of the masher had passed out of sight. "He'll make a general charge before long, and you will be expected to surrender at discretion."

"Not to that fellow!" exclaimed Helen.

"Then to a better one, eh?"

"Never mind to whom!" was the response. "As I have said, I want nothing to do with Dick Dido. He is only a schemer who is always playing to keep his pockets well-lined. Don't I know that he has some covert object behind the little persecutions he has inflicted upon me? Mother knew his father, and Dick is but a chip of the old block."

"Nothing else, Helen," remarked the boy. "If you have no objections, I'll just follow the walking bandbox in hopes of picking up something for Burt Boffin to digest."

But Tony found that following a man in his mind was one thing, and the actual tracking quite another.

Dick Dido had vanished, and the boy soon gave up looking for him.

"Here we are!" suddenly exclaimed a voice at Tony's elbow, and at the same time a hand closed on his arm.

"Just the man I am looking for!" returned Tony Sharp, looking up into Burt Boffin's face.

"I've been trying to find Dick Dido, but the statue has given me the slip after passing our house without the courtesy of a call on Helen. We thought he was certain to drop in, and I was in a position to see and hear the whole interview. But it didn't come off."

Boffin, the detective, laughed at the boy's story and the two passed on to a little room where, without warning, an old-fashioned pocket-book was placed in Tony's hand.

"Where did you get this old relic?" asked the astonished boy.

"It was one of my lucky finds," came the reply. "It was lost by Old Skinner, who persists in refusing to say of what he was robbed."

Tony turned the leather pocketbook almost inside out. It was truly an antiquated affair, large enough to hold bills without folding, and had from all appearances seen a good deal of service in its time.

"Was it empty when you found it?" queried the boy, glancing up at the detective, who was watching him with an amused look.

"Not quite."

As he spoke, Burt Boffin dived into his waistcoat pocket, and brought up a bit of paper, closely folded and yellow from age.

"This memorandum was stowed away in one of the stalls of the pocketbook," continued Boffin. "If you look close you will see that it was made a good many years ago, before you were born, boy."

Tony was already examining the discolored paper with an eager eye.

"This is one of the missing links!" he cried. "Mother always said that it was in the month of March, 1849. What does this writing say? It mentions that on a certain day in a certain year, Stephen Skinner went to Philadelphia, and there paid 'J. B. F.' a certain sum of money—mentioned here—for services rendered."

"Well?" asked the detective quietly, as if desirous of drawing the boy out.

"That 'J. B. F.' was a cunning lawyer, of the Quaker City. The services which he rendered Old Skinner then took from my mother the little all she had, as well as that which would have enriched her in time. This is the battle I've been fighting ever since I was old enough to understand her story. Old Skinner is one of the greatest rascals in existence. He has rebuffed me more than once. Mother has no legal hold on him, because at this day she can prove nothing against him. 'J. B. F.' is dead. The last time mother called on the Vulture of Wall street, he denied that he ever knew the Philadelphia lawyer, and finally ordered her out of his house in a passion. Now, I have a link, Mr. Boffin. Here is evidence that on a certain day Old Skinner paid 'J. B. F.' six hundred dollars 'for services rendered.' Now, let the old scamp refuse to make restitution if he dare."

"He will do nothing else," rejoined the detective. "He will simply deny the ownership of the memorandum. Then where are you?"

Tony colored and then as suddenly grew pale.

"But I'm going to back this paper up with proof!" he exclaimed, as his eyes brightened.

"Oh, that will do," was the response. "But you have a big job on hand, my boy."

"I know it. It is a fight for my mother's good name as well as for a fortune rightfully ours. Old Skinner knows me and what I want. He knows, too, that I am going to stand for my rights, and I expect him to fight me in a mean, underhand manner, just like the old scamp he is. Can I keep this paper, Mr. Boffin?"

"It is yours, subject to my call," the detective said, whereupon Tony put the yellow bit away. "How is the old shark getting along?" he inquired.

"Famously, the doctor says. He ejected a reporter from the house at noon, and will be on 'Change to-morrow with his head bandaged."

"Then I shall see him, but not for an interview. I want to look after Mesa Marx first."

"She is not in the city."

"Not in New York?" cried Tony.

"I have just seen her on the train, ticketed for Philadelphia."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"I wish I could be at her heels."

"I don't think she will be gone long."

"Did she take any luggage?"

"None but a small grip."

"Mesa has gone over to the old stamping-ground. I know the Quaker City like a book."

"Then perhaps you know where Blank street is."

"I do! If there's a house on that street not known to me, I'd like to see it. But we left there years ago. Mother came over here to be near Old Skinner in hopes of getting even. What made you mention Blank street, Mr. Boffin?"

"Because I think it is Mesa Marx's destination."

Tony's eyes seemed to dilate with expectation.

"Of course you cannot give the number," said he.

"I am not so sure that I cannot," was the rejoinder, accompanied by a smile.

"Mesa Marx opened her grip in the depot and lost out of it two little cards, one of which was blank, and the other with an address in pencil on it. If I am not mistaken, the number mentioned on the card was 404 Blank street."

"And the name?"

"Fallowhill."

Tony Sharp shook his head.

"I never heard the name before," remarked he. "But I am sure that No. 404 is next door to where we lived. Mr. Boffin, I am going to Philadelphia!"

"When?"

"When the next train departs."

"Then you will have to race to the depot."

The boy sprang up and covered the distance between the detective and himself by a single stride.

"Mesa Marx who, with her friend Jack, is playing a deep game against Old Skinner, has gone to the Quaker City for a purpose. What takes her back to the street on which we lived

when Old Skinner cheated us out of what we had and secured to himself that which we expected? It tells me that she has not quite the hold on the Vulture of Wall street that she wants. The old man is disposed to fight her game just as he has been fighting me. This much is plain to me, Mr. Boffin. It is a big fight and an up-hill one, but I intend to make it. Old Skinner must pay back or suffer for the past, and Mesa Marx and her companion shall not succeed in robbing the old vulture of some other people's money."

Tony had his hand on the door-knob by this time, and the following moment, with a sudden "Good-by, Mr. Boffin," he disappeared.

"That boy will win!" mentally exclaimed the detective, thus left alone. "He's got the snap of an old fighter and the perseverance of one. But the odds are against him. If he falls into the hands of Mesa Marks and her friend Jack—who has two names—or gets tripped up by Old Skinner, he may wish he had never undertaken this task. But luck go with you, Tony Sharp. You have Burt Boffin for a friend, and he'll stand by you through thick and thin."

Meantime Tony was far from the detective's lodgings hastening eagerly to the ferry in hopes of catching the next train for the Quaker City.

CHAPTER VI.

HOW MESA TRACKED.

THE boy was successful in his desires and when the Philadelphia Express pulled out of the depot he had a comfortable seat all to himself and was chuckling over his good luck.

In the meantime Mesa Marx was far ahead of him and when the cars put her down in the Quaker City she hurried at once to 404 Blank street.

There was a flush of eagerness on the woman's face and when the door was opened in response to her knocks she asked if Mrs. Fallowhill could be seen.

There was an affirmative reply to her query and Mesa soon stood face to face with a large woman of fifty, dark of skin and with few traces of former good looks left.

"I thought you would come back some day," exclaimed Mrs. Fallowhill, a queer smile overspreading but not illumining her countenance.

"You did?"

"Yes. You went off the last time with a proviso, and your coming back leads me to believe that things haven't gone to suit you."

Mesa said nothing for a moment.

"You are partially right," she answered at length. "Every thing hasn't gone my way, but I'm not discouraged. Who is your next door neighbor now?"

"I have none on the left if that's the house you mean."

Mesa gave a slight start. She could not help it for the news seemed too good to be true.

"I would have written and told you only I lost your address," continued Mrs. Fallowhill. "As I said I thought you would come back; that's why I waited. The house has been empty three months, and I have the renting of it."

"That is good news. Have you looked through it, Mrs. Fallowhill?"

"Not much. I did not know where to look."

"Of course not," put in Mesa with rising impatience. "If you don't object, I'll take a run through the place."

It did not take Mrs. Fallowhill long to produce several keys which she handed to Mesa without hesitation.

"Take your time to it," said she. "You won't be disturbed, for nobody is likely to come to see the property."

Five minutes later Mesa stood in a carpetless room through the shutters of which a few straggling beams of dying daylight came.

It was a lonely and ghostly place, and her footsteps sent out a weird sound wherever she went.

The house had been built in the days of wide fireplaces, and was old-fashioned in every particular.

There were cobwebs in the corners of the lofty room as if the last occupants were very lazy or the spiders very industrious.

Mesa went up-stairs to a large apartment with the cleverness of a person acquainted with the plan of the house. There was a fire-place at one side of the room but not so large a one as that below.

Many of the bricks were bare, the whitewash having fallen from them years before. A few ashes told the story of the last fire on the hearth.

Mesa Marx went up to the fire-place and counted the bricks from the left side upward by touching each one with her finger.

"This is the side," she said to herself aloud.

"I have faithfully committed the directions to memory, and in a case of this kind I would not be apt to forget anything."

In another moment she was trying to remove a certain brick from the chimney.

It resisted her efforts with a good deal of stubbornness, but after several trials she succeeded in pulling it out. Then the woman leaned forward until her face almost touched the chimney, and all at once her slender hand darted into the opening made by the missing brick.

An expression of disappointment overspread Mesa's face when she found the niche empty.

She was not satisfied to believe the evidence of touch for her fingers searched every corner until the white nails were torn on the rough sides of the bricks.

"As I live! there's nothing here!" cried Mesa. "Can it be that, after all, I have taken out the wrong brick? Surely I did not make a mistake in counting," and she drew off and looked sorrowfully at the hole in the chimney.

To her sharp eyes there was plenty of evidence that the brick had been removed before. It had concealed something in the past, but Mesa was certain that it was not there now.

She replaced the brick and turned away.

"I can't afford to go back without a new hold on old moneybags," she murmured. "The chimney was expected to give me a weapon, but it has disappointed me."

She stood undecided in the middle of the room, her hands clinched and her eyes fairly aflame.

"I forgot to ask Mrs. Fallowhill who occupied the house last!" she suddenly exclaimed. "There might be something in that. I am almost positive that the brick has been taken out and put back within a certain time although it seemed to resist my efforts to remove it."

Mrs. Fallowhill was startled when she heard Mesa's voice at her side and caught sight of the female detective's face.

"Who left the house last?" eagerly inquired Mesa.

"A family named Copeland."

"What did the man do?"

Mrs. Fallowhill smiled.

"There's where I'm at sea," she replied. "He didn't seem to do anything, but he always had plenty of money, paying his rent in advance like a gentleman."

"Did they go off without warning?"

"Very suddenly. They took their goods away at night, and I lost 'em altogether. I didn't complain, however, though when I went over to look at the house I found a brick out of the chimney in the upper front room—"

"You did, Mrs. Fallowhill?" interrupted Mesa.

"Nothing else had been disturbed. A brick out of a chimney is nothing when the rent has been squared up. Asa Copeland could have taken out a dozen bricks, and there would have been no growling."

Mesa's brain was in a strange whirl of excitement.

"Has Asa Copeland left the city?" she inquired.

"He was here three weeks ago, for I ran across him in market. He didn't care to recognize me from some cause or other, and I refused to force myself upon his attention."

"You don't know where he lives now?"

Mrs. Fallowhill shook her head.

"I tell you, Miss Marx," cried Mrs. Fallowhill on second thought, "there is a chance to find the Copelands."

"Let me have it!" exclaimed Mesa.

"Mrs. Copeland has a fancy for oriole feathers. She had the finest collection of such you ever saw. I believe she would spend her last penny and go to bed hungry to gratify her whim. She told me once that a certain milliner down-town was commissioned to supply her with the choicest oriole feathers the market afforded. If Nina Copeland is still in the city, she has lost none of her taste for orioles. I'll warrant that much, Miss Marx."

As a matter of course Mesa was not long inquiring after Mrs. Copeland's milliner, and as Mrs. Fallowhill had not forgotten the address she soon had the desired information.

"I'm going to run the Copelands down," she murmured. "The brick on the floor tells me that they discovered the secret of the chimney. What it concealed must become mine! I will not stop short of the prize."

Mesa Marx went down-town through the gathering dusk of a warm day. She seemed to know the streets of Philadelphia as she did those of New York.

Half an hour after quitting Mrs. Fallowhill's house, she entered the open door of a fashionable millinery store and was about to address a

young lady who rose to wait on her when a well-dressed woman came toward her from the end of the room.

"The oriole is gaining in color!" said this person to the young girl who had waited on her. "See that I get a chance at your next lot, before it is picked over. I'm your best oriole customer, you know."

These words ran through Mesa Marx with a thrill. Unexpectedly she had found the very woman she was looking for—Mrs. Copeland! There could be no mistake! at least, she would think of none.

Nina Copeland carrying a small package of her favorite feathers passed out, and Mesa in her eagerness followed without ceremony.

Not to lose the feather-fancier for a moment was her burning desire.

It was woman on the trail of woman under the early lamps of the Quaker City.

Mesa Marx had the cunning and perseverance of a tigress on the trail of a foe and the guiding figure ahead did not seem to have the slightest suspicion of what was taking place.

Nina Copeland dropped into several places and made little purchases on her way home.

Mesa saw her all the time and followed with her spirits up.

When Nina ran up the steps of a certain building Mesa was at her very heels.

All at once the hunted woman turned, and the next moment she bounded down the steps and halted in front of her persistent trailer.

"I've seen you all the time!" she hissed, in Mesa's face. "If you follow me another step, I'll make my hands meet in your throat!"

The New York woman lost breath and color.

CHAPTER VII.

TONY FINDS A TRAP.

"WELL," thought Mesa, "I tracked her home anyhow. Mrs. Copeland is a keener creature than I imagined her to be, but I guess there's a way of getting ahead of her. She is very suspicious, thought I was a spy, and then expected to get rid of me by a threat. I'm not so easily dismissed. I did not come to the Quaker City to be thrown off the trail by a few words."

The New York woman had marked the house before she turned away. It was not her intention to give up the chase so soon; in point of fact, the finding of Mrs. Copeland only stimulated her to renewed efforts, and she was now convinced that the secret niche in the chimney had been discovered by Nina and her husband.

When Mesa went back to Mrs. Fallowhill's she found that lady awaiting her in the parlor.

"I am almost certain that I saw the Sharp boy on the street awhile ago!" exclaimed Mrs. Fallowhill whose countenance showed that she had something of importance to communicate.

"What Sharp boy?" asked Mesa, trying to keep her curiosity below the excitable point.

"The son of the woman who was my neighbor a good many years ago," was the reply. "To be sure, he was small then, but he had his mother's looks, and they have not left the urchin whom I saw awhile ago."

"What was he doing?"

"He was looking at the number over my door."

"Did he attempt to come in?"

"No. I watched him from the window until he went away."

"How was he dressed?"

"He wore a common gray blouse, brown pants, and a straw hat."

"Are you reasonably sure he was the Sharp boy?"

"I must say that I am."

"What became of the family when they left the house next day?"

"They went to New York."

"Was Mrs. Sharp a widow then?"

"No. Her husband always a sickly, dispirited man died some years later. Mrs. Sharp was a woman who kept her own secrets pretty well, but she had a time with an old fellow who seemed bent on getting the best of her according to her story."

"Did he succeed?"

"I think he did. He lived for a while in the house you searched awhile ago."

"What was his name?"

"Stephen Skinner."

"What became of him?"

Mrs. Fallowhill shook her head.

"I've lost him entirely. He was sometimes visited by a lawyer named Fleecer, and he was Fleecer in more than name, too."

"Where is he now?"

"The lawyer?"

"Yes."

"He got killed by the cars a year after Stephen Skinner went off. Mrs. Sharp had no children when she was having her great trouble with Skinner and the lawyer. They came afterward, a boy and a girl, and both were growing finely when the family went away. I saw 'em so much that that is why I say the boy was back here a while ago."

Mrs. Fallowhill's statement possessed great interest for Mesa.

"Which direction did the boy take when he went away?" she queried.

"He went down street. But you might as well look for a pin in Fairmount Park, and at night, too, as to look for him."

The New York woman permitted a smile to appear at the corners of her lips.

"I am going out," she said to Mrs. Fallowhill. "I wish you would keep a sharp lookout for the boy; he may come back."

"If he is Tony Sharp he'll be here," was the answer. "What shall I do if he comes?"

"Hold him, if possible, till I come back."

There was a bright flash in the depths of Mesa's eyes and her voice was full of power while she spoke.

"I'll keep him if I can," rejoined Mrs. Fallowhill. "Little Tony Sharp used to like 'Mamma Fallowhill' as he called me."

Mesa Marx went out again.

The coming of Tony Sharp to Philadelphia seemed to have altered her plans.

She did not go down to the house to which she had tracked Mina Copeland. Another scheme appeared to inspire her.

"I want the young spy!" she mentally exclaimed. "He came over for a purpose and I think I can see through it. The young imp is dogging me. He is playing the independent track-hound in order to baffle the little game I have under way. Let me see if I can't put an end to his schemes. I know how he shadowed Old Skinner and how the Vulture of Wall street has rebuffed him time and again. I don't want any young foxes on my trail. I won't have them there. This one must go!" And Mesa shut her hands hard, splitting a seam in her glove.

"If Mrs. Fallowhill did see the boy at the house, won't he be looking for me?" suddenly thought the New York schemer. "It seems to me that I'm watched now by some one."

Mesa began to scrutinize the neighborhood in a cautious manner.

She had halted at a corner, across the street from which was one of those little parks that dot the Quaker City in every direction.

The night was warm, and the benches and walks were well patronized by people of all ages.

Mesa's wandering eyes gave every boy whom they ferreted out more than a passing glance.

"I'll get closer to the boy against you tree," thought Dick Dido's friend. "He's been there five minutes with no apparent end in view. If he turns out to be the young spy who is at my heels he will never get entertained by Fanny Fallowhill."

Mesa crossed the street without any seeming show of watchfulness, and reached the sidewalk along the park.

In a flash, as it were, the figure at the tree turned out to be Tony Sharp.

She could not be mistaken. She had seen the boy more than once of late in New York, and her eyes were not going to deceive her now.

A marking glance was all that Mesa cast upon Tony, the boy spy. It had satisfied her, and that was enough.

She passed on, with a sly look over her shoulder when she had gone a few steps.

The post by the tree was vacant, and a boyish figure was between her and the spot.

"Fortune is putting some lucky cards into my hands," murmured the woman. "I take this as a good omen. Now I will lead the boy ferret into as neat a trap as he ever dreamed of. I think I'm not altogether a stranger in the Quaker City."

For some distance Mesa kept straight down the street with the sly figure of Tony at her heels.

She did not seem to pay the slightest attention to him.

"She wasn't so hard to pick up after all," said the boy to himself. "Boson was right when he said she had come to Philadelphia. He seldom makes a mistake, and I won't make any either this time."

On went Mesa, up one street and down another, as if her pedestrian journey was to have no ending.

Tony Sharp followed with the pertinacity of a sleuth-hound.

At last Mesa dodged suddenly into an alley, which was paved with brick.

Here and there along the narrow way burned a light which did not go far toward dispelling the gloom.

Tony soon reached the mouth of the alley and just in time to see his quarry knocking at a door a few yards away.

He had run Mesa down on a mysterious mission.

A few moments the figure of the fair Gotham schemer was visible at the door, and then it disappeared, of course inside.

The shutting of the portal carried Tony forward.

He went down the alley as noiseless as possible and close to the silent houses on one side.

The door beyond which Mesa had disappeared was a common affair. It had no panels at all, and instead of a knob, possessed a latch.

The boy ferret wondered how Mesa had found it so readily, since, in his belief, she knew so much about New York and so little concerning Philadelphia, but he had no time to speculate in.

The house, as he could make it out, was an old story-and-a-half brick, with a small window above the door. It did not promise a very nice interior to any one who wished to investigate.

"If I could but get inside," muttered the boy. "Mesa Marx came here, to this old house, for a purpose connected with the game she is playing, and I don't want to miss an act. May be they left the door unlocked. They did, by Jove!"

Tony's hand pressed the latch and opened the door.

He stood for a moment on the discovered threshold with a thousand thoughts surging through his brain and his heart in his throat.

"Pshaw! if I go back now, I may lose everything!" he suddenly cried. "I think I'm equal to Mesa Marx, so here goes!"

He stepped forward into a dark hall beyond the door, which he shut behind him.

The next moment a pair of arms were flung around him, and a piece of cloth was thrown over his face and drawn tight.

At the same time he was lifted from the floor, and while he gasped for breath, he felt himself borne swiftly away, whither and by whom he knew not.

CHAPTER VIII.

A LEAP FOR LIBERTY.

"PRETTY cleverly caught, and about what I deserved!" said Tony Sharp to himself, before he was placed on his feet again, with the covering as tight as ever about his head. "I have discovered—no doubt to my sorrow—that Mesa Marx knows how to take care of herself. She'll look after her own interests, and mine, too, for that matter. The best I can do is to take matters as they turn up, and make the best fight in my power."

Scarcely had the boy been set down, when the hands that had clutched him dropped away, and he was untouched.

He stood bewildered for a moment, and then tore at the suffocating veil.

It did not take him long to remove it, and when he had done so, he found that he could see but little better than before.

He was in an unknown apartment, whose dimensions he could not make out for the darkness that prevailed. Whether it was large or small, circular or square, he did not know.

There was nothing about him by which he could tell if he was the only tenant of the dark hole, and he waited some time for the voices of his captors.

After awhile he went forward with outstretched arms, and brought up against a wall, which was smooth and without a crack.

Groping his way to the left by means of this barrier, he found a door, probably the one by which he had entered the place. It was as immovable as the wall itself.

The New York boy was dumfounded for a short time.

"I would like to get a clew to where I am," he cried. "This is torture, and I would sooner be shut up with a lot of hyenas, so I had a little light on the subject, than be cooped in here."

His words came back from several directions, in dismal echoes.

"I can try the door, at any rate," suddenly ejaculated Tony. "It opens from me, and that gives me a chance."

He stepped back, and gathered strength for a second, then launched himself with all his might against the portal.

Though he fell heavily against the planks, and

seemingly with force enough to achieve a victory, he was unsuccessful. The door remained as firm as before, and Tony was compelled to withdraw.

"You can butt yourself to death against that door," came a voice from beyond the lock, and apparently in the adjoining room.

"Who are you?" demanded Tony, springing forward and applying his ear to the keyhole.

"Ho! that's another question," laughed the unseen.

"Well, I am not talking to Mesa," remarked the boy to himself. "The person beyond the door is a man, her partner no doubt. I can't expect any favors from him if he stands in with her, as he undoubtedly does. Neither do I think he is one who can be frightened."

Then Tony raised his voice.

"You had no right to bring me here," said he.

"What right had you to enter a strange house without knocking?" came the quick response.

The New York youth made no answer, and he thought he heard a low chuckle supplement his silence.

"Tell the woman for me that the person who holds the lost cards may hold the best ones!" he exclaimed, when he spoke again.

"What woman?"

"You need not try to deceive me. You are her friend, and I need not mention a name well known to you."

"Come, boy. Don't waste any time thinking that what you call 'the best cards' are liable to fall to you, seeing who is against you," said the voice, after a brief pause. "In the first place, you walked into a trap of your own accord, and secondly, it is apt to hold you a long time."

"Well, tell her what I've said, anyhow."

"She'll only laugh."

"I don't care what she does. They laugh best who laugh last."

"Go away with your proverbs! They are 'no good' in this house. Besides, you had better take things coolly, for you're tight. The trap fits the mouse and the mouse should not squeak."

Then certain footsteps moved away from the door, and Tony heard them die in the space beyond.

The voice, which was surely that of a man, was totally strange to him. It was rasping and rough, like the tongue of a person in the lower walks of life, and the imprisoned boy pictured to himself an uncouth jailer with a hard face and merciless eyes.

He could not be expected to take his confinement with any degree of patience. He was quick-witted and impulsive, and wanted to be at work and on the trail which had brought him from New York.

An actual minute in the dungeon was to him an hour of torture.

He tried the walls again and again as the eagle tries its bars, but always with the same result.

The room was without the most common article of furniture. He had to stand up or lie down, there was no half-way resting-post, and he preferred the former.

Now and then certain sounds came to his ears. He could not tell whether they originated in the house or came from the street.

New York Tony had brought up against an unexpected obstacle, and just when he was on the eve of an important discovery.

Mesa Marx could now play her Philadelphia hand at her leisure, and then return to New York and finish her game for Old Skinner's money.

It is no wonder that this thought galled the boy shadow.

If he could have broken through the door which had successfully resisted him, Tony might have seen the person with whom he had conversed.

He would have discovered that his mind picture had not been overdrawn, for the strange man was a large, villainous-looking fellow with an evil face covered with a reddish beard. He occupied a small room whose carpet was a medley of patches. The dirty lamp on a greasy bracket revealed the interior of the place, a veritable den of filth whose every aspect matched well its presiding genius.

Every now and then the man consulted an old-fashioned gold watch which he fished from a tattered waist-coat.

"If she doesn't come back at the end of an hour, I'm to—yes, I am!" he grinned. "A plum sometimes falls into one's lap when one isn't looking for it. And it's generally the biggest plum on the tree, too. That's the fix I find

myself in just now, and the plum couldn't have fallen at a more opportune time, either. She's got ten minutes yet. I'll deal squarely with her and give her the benefit of the last second."

The speaker, who might have sat for a portrait of Daniel Quilp, held the watch in his hand, dial uppermost, and watched the hand reel off the seconds.

At the end of the time he had mentioned, he took a long breath and put up the timepiece.

"Time up and she isn't here," said he, addressing his own hideous self. "The job is easily done, and nobody in particular will be the wiser for it."

He went to the door and looked out.

The gloom of the brick-paved alley was before him, and the street beyond it seemed for the moment to be sound asleep.

"I don't hear her, and it's past the time," he muttered, drawing back and bolting the door as he shut it.

Then he took the lamp from its perch and left the room.

In a chamber beyond he opened a closet in the wall, and reaching into it, found a coil of cord, which he examined in the light.

His eyes had a strange, greenish glitter which was absolutely dangerous, and he seemed to laugh within himself while he inspected the cord.

"It's all O. K.," said he, shutting the closet door with a kick, and the next moment he crossed the room, and paused at a portal securely fastened.

He did not know that in the intense darkness that lay beyond this door, a boy was listening to the slight noises he had made.

He could not see Tony Sharp, the Gotham ferret, leaning forward with his hands half-clinched, and his breath nearly gone.

The mouse of the trap had heard him, and in a second had prepared for what was coming.

The man placed the lamp on the floor, and strung the coil of cord on his arm. Next he raised one hand and touched the bolt along the door.

"He is coming in!" passed through Tony's mind. "And his entrance can have but one meaning!"

Burt Boffin's little companion felt that a crisis in his life had arrived.

In another moment the bolt shot back, sending a thrill through his frame, and then the door was jerked open.

Tony Sharp caught sight of a great figure between him and a certain light, but it did not dismay him.

"Now or never!" he mentally exclaimed, and the bound he made carried him past the man, and into the room beyond.

He heard an oath and a cry as he alighted on his feet, and then a laugh that sounded like doom.

"It's no use, boy!" cried the man as he turned. "The doors are locked!"

CHAPTER IX.

OLD SKINNER'S VISITOR.

WHILE these somewhat exciting events were transpiring in the Quaker City, others not without interest were taking place in its great rival between the two rivers.

Old Skinner had pluck and a good constitution, and these things combined promised to bring him through all right in a short time.

He had not been hurt as badly as was at first supposed, and the day after his bout with the unknown robbers (unknown to the police, for the old vulture refused to talk,) he appeared at his old haunts bandaged, but, as he said with a grin, "still in the ring."

It happened that a certain investment made a short time before turned out unusually well that day and the old fellow went home in good humor at night.

He was alone in the house with the exception of the deaf servant, whom he never took into consideration. She occupied a garret-like room in a distant wing of the old-fashioned structure and never saw him save at meals.

Old Skinner was figuring up the gains of the day when the bell twinkled in the hall.

"If I thought it was a detective or a reporter, I'd let 'em wear the wire out," grumbled the old shark. "They'd bother a person to death if they'd get a chance, and I'm not ready to go that way."

The bell seemed to ring in a manner which told that the person at the door did not belong to either of the classes mentioned by Old Skinner, and the broker out of patience at last shuffled into the hall.

When he opened the door he found a female figure on the step.

A shadow of aversion crossed Old Skinner's face.

"Good-night, Mr. Skinner," said a voice as the caller walked in and turned on the old man in the light of the gas.

He looked at the woman, who had passed fifty, was rather good-looking and plainly clad.

"I did not send for you!" he began, getting white at the lips. "Don't you recollect what I said the last time I saw you? Well, I'm still of the same opinion and I—"

"One moment, Stephen Skinner," interrupted the woman who eyed the old vulture sternly. "I am not here on my own account. My own interests weigh nothing against the welfare of those I love. Don't say that you will not listen to me. You shall. I won't be your unwelcome guest long—a few minutes at the furthest. But you must hear me. There is no getting out of it now."

"Very well, then, come along," responded Old Skinner, turning on his heel and leading the way to the library. "I guess the quickest way to get rid of you is to give you string."

He waved his visitor sulkily to a chair, while he took his accustomed seat at the table and looked at her with the mien of a hawk.

"I want to know for the last time what you are going to do," began the woman.

"For the last time, eh? I thought it was the last time when I dismissed you a year ago."

"You thought so, of course. My children are growing up and are in need. Helen is seventeen, and Tony a year younger."

"Never mind their ages," broke in Old Skinner. "I'll take all that for granted."

The woman's eyes seemed to get an indignant look, but she beat her anger down.

"You know very well how much you made by the game which you played years ago with the assistance of the Philadelphia lawyer," she continued.

"What game?"

"Don't ask me, Stephen Skinner. A mere reference to it pains me. You took from me and mine that which to-day, if possessed by us, would lift us out of poverty and make life pleasant. You made our property a stepping-stone to the fortune you enjoy, but so far you refuse to refund a cent."

"Don't I, though?" heartlessly laughed the old wretch. "I'd like to see you or anybody else get ahead of me in a business transaction."

The woman's cheeks appeared to tingle under his rasping words.

"It was not a business transaction, though you call it such," exclaimed she. "It was downright robbery."

"That's a pretty serious charge against a gentleman, and in his own house, too," cried Old Skinner, rubbing his hands.

"I have nothing to take back!" Tony Sharp's mother went on. "As I have said, I don't care for myself. I want my children to have something with which to begin the battle of life."

"Your boy has enough now," growled the Wall street Vulture. "He has impudence enough to take him around the world without a dollar in his pockets. Why, about the first person I saw in my own house after I had been hurt, was that boy of yours. I ordered him out, but he didn't go till he got ready. More than this: he has stopped me on the street, he has dogged my footsteps, played spy times without number, and all for the purpose of putting forth that old chestnut about what I took from you long ago. I've made up my mind to be bothered no longer by the boy. I'll put him where the dogs won't bark at him. I'm going to be free to come and go without being molested by any of your family, Mrs. Sharp."

"Then you refuse to pay any of it back?"

The question seemed to come from between the woman's wedded lips.

"I won't be bled," answered Old Skinner.

"You mean you won't do justice to those whom you have wronged?"

"Just as you like, madame," he laughed. "If you expect to bleed me you'll find yourself mistaken, I'm a turnip, and there's no blood in me!"

The miser-broker settled back in his chair and looked at Mrs. Sharp with the air of a man who has everything in his own hands.

There was a provoking grin at his thin lips and a cunning glitter in the depths of his eyes.

"You call this final?" queried Mrs. Sharp.

"Final? I should say so! My word is like the laws of the Medes and Persians."

Tony's mother left her chair and looked down into the upturned face of the money-hawk.

"Then I will see what I can do," said she, coolly, and in a manner that startled Old Skinner.

"What will you do?"

"You have driven me to the wall, Stephen Skinner," was the reply. "I have suffered in silence a good many years, but they have passed. You know that I am a professional nurse, I presume."

"I don't know what you are."

"Well, I nurse people who are dangerously sick. I go to their homes and give them all my time for their money."

"For all their money, eh?" sneered Old Skinner.

Mrs. Sharp colored.

"I have a patient now who is very low," she resumed. "He knew you when you were not known as the Vulture of Wall street, a name which fits you very well."

"What's his name?"

Tony's mother merely smiled.

"Ho! you want it to appear that you are the possessor of a secret," cried the old fellow. "Your patient is as imaginary as the man in the moon. I'm an old bird, Becky Sharp, and I grew my full plumage a long time ago."

"This gentleman knew you then?" the woman proceeded quietly. "By the way, he knew Jabez Fleecer, the lawyer, too. He has been very sick but he will get well."

"And you propose to scare me by threatening to make known certain knowledge he claims to possess?" cried Old Skinner.

"I propose to strike for my rights—to make you disgorge the wealth you took from me when you played your mean game with the Quaker City lawyer to help you."

In an instant Old Skinner was on his feet and his face was crimson.

"By Jupiter! this is too much!" he roared. "Yonder is the door, Becky Sharp. If you bother me any more, I'll have you arrested for blackmail. And if I do, you'll discover that Old Skinner, as they call me, has power enough to shut you up from the barking dogs."

He pointed toward the door with quivering finger and appeared on the eve of springing at the woman and hustling her from the room.

"Don't come back here!" he went on. "And tell that little spy of yours to keep his distance, besides. The lion hasn't lost his claws because he's old. This is the last interview, Becky Sharp. I guess that is plain English."

"I am satisfied," answered Mrs. Sharp unabashed by the old shark's rage. "We will never beg for our rights again. When next we meet I will be in a position to demand them."

"Get out!"

"My boy knows more than you think he does, and if he has played spy, as you assert, it has not been for nothing."

"This is enough!" cried Old Skinner. "Give me trouble and I'll make you envy Lazarus for his wealth!"

Becky Sharp gave the Wall street Vulture a parting look and went to the door.

"Come back, and feel my mailed hand!" growled Old Skinner while his mad eyes sparkled.

"I'll come back!" was the reply, and then the door shut and the figure of Tony's mother vanished.

"Let her make a move—just one—against me and I'll crush her like an eggshell!" and the hand of the miser broker struck the table a heavy blow.

CHAPTER X.

THE TRACK OF A CYCLONE.

MRS. SHARP did not seem to breathe again until she was once more on the street with the lights of New York visible everywhere.

She showed on her countenance the results of her unprofitable interview with Old Skinner for some time or until she had left the miser's house several blocks behind.

"Yes, I will come back," murmured the persecuted woman, shutting her hands as if to emphasize her words. "If I am not mistaken, we have at last a hold on the scoundrel who robbed us and sent my husband to his grave. He pretended to laugh away my story about my patient, but I could see that it troubled him. Go on in your meanness, Stephen Skinner. The bounds of justice are at your heels, and it will take all your cunning to keep them off. If you can do this, you have more power than I credit you with."

Becky Sharp's figure was soon swallowed up in a throng of people and she hastened to the humble tenement she called home.

Her first inquiry when she had entered was concerning Tony.

Helen said that her brother had not returned, and then added, quickly:

"Mother, I have just dismissed a visitor."

"A visitor, Helen?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Sharp's look was an eager query, which the daughter understood.

"My visitor is known as the Broadway Statue," continued Helen, smiling.

"Not Dick Dido?"

"No one else."

"And pray what did that young scamp want?"

"I'll wager almost anything that you cannot guess."

Helen's pretty face was quite red while she spoke.

"I promised Tony to receive the fellow with a show of cordiality," she resumed. "You know I hold him in utter contempt. His very make-up is abhorrent, to say nothing of his character. Well, mother, he came here with the most brazen proposition I ever listened to—for listen to it I did, with my agreement with Tony in mind. He asked me to become his wife!"

"Dick Dido, Helen?" exclaimed Mrs. Sharp, as if she could not credit her daughter's astounding statement. "Of course you immediately showed him the door."

"No, mother; I told him that I would think the matter over—"

"In sober earnest, child?"

"In as good earnest as I could assume under the circumstances. I listened to the Broadway Statue because he coupled his proposal to some queer words."

"What were they?"

"He pretended to be in possession of a secret which will better our circumstances. He threw out a hint here and there, and claimed that he can lift us to wealth and right the wrongs we have suffered at the hands of Old Skinner, the Wall street Vulture."

"And he proposes to do this—when?"

"When I am his wife," smiled Helen.

Mrs. Sharp was silent for a moment, and the young girl saw her face settle down to sober thoughtfulness.

"When are you to answer him?" she asked, looking at Helen.

"He gave me twenty-four hours, and I silently accepted."

"A great deal can be accomplished in that time if no mistakes are made," said the widow. "I wish we had Tony here to counsel with. We don't want to draw Lionel into the muddle—not at present, Helen."

"Not at all if we can help it!" exclaimed Helen, blushing at thought of the lover so far above Dick Dido in every way.

"We will help it, child," was the assuring response. "The Broadway Statue knows something, or he would not play the hand he does. The police have not yet discovered who dealt with Old Skinner the other night, and the money shark still refuses to invoice his losses. Mr. Boffin, Tony's detective friend, is doing something in the case, and a visit to him might help us along."

Just then, and almost before Mrs. Sharp had ceased talking, a knocking was heard, and Helen, with an exclamation of delightful surprise, admitted Burt Boffin himself.

There was a cheery look in the detective's face and one which was not dissipated by Helen's narration of Dick Dido's visit and proposal.

"The young rascal, as the friend and companion of Mesa Marx, ought to know something," said he. "He isn't the Broadway Statue all the time, and when he is not, he masquerades as 'Jack,' the cunning woman's right bower in more than one kind of villainy. How long has he been gone, Helen?"

"About an hour," was the reply.

"Did you really send him off in good spirits?"

"I did not think it just the thing to discourage him."

"That was right. Mr. Dick Dido is trying to feather his nest."

Helen's face grew scarlet.

"He is apt to see his feathers take wing!" she cried.

"He does not think so."

"I suppose not. What is his game, Mr. Boffin?"

The detective laughed a little mysteriously, at which Helen held up one of her dainty hands.

"I forgot for a moment that you are a detective and on a trail," she laughed in reply to his own good humor. "I don't press the question, mind you."

As Helen did not insist, Burt Boffin kept his own counsels and as he was bidding mother and daughter good-night, he said:

"If I am not mistaken, Mrs. Sharp, you will get to keep your last promise to Old Skinner. You will meet him again and on equal terms."

"I want to do so!"

"The word of Burt Boffin for it that you shall!"

Five minutes afterward Tony's friend was on the street hurrying along with a complacent smile lingering at his lips.

"If Tony has good luck in Philadelphia and I here, what's to prevent us from making the Vulture of the Gold Exchange pay in full the debt he owes to vengeance. Mrs. Sharp's visit to him has roused the lion in his nature and he will not stop short of the meanest and deepest schemes to come out of this fight with flying colors. He knows who robbed him, yet he has not tried to recover the spoil. Now I am going to see what I can do toward finding it. I did not intend to make this move previous to Tony's return, but late events have altered my plans."

Burt Boffin was soon on a street which lost itself in Broadway.

He did not take particular care to screen himself from observation though he did not try to keep in the light all the time.

At last he came opposite a house whose number appeared to gratify him and another moment he had passed into one of those open hallways so common in boarding-houses in the cities.

The Gotham detective knew that Dick Dido the dude and rascal had rooms on the second floor.

In fact, a good many people besides him knew this for Dick had never made any secret of his habitation.

To mount the carpeted steps just ahead was the result of a little effort, and the detective stood on the first landing in the dim light of a wall jet that burned all night.

There was a strange stillness in the house, as if it was deserted, but Burt Boffin evidently thought otherwise.

He walked past the gas-jet and listened at a door.

After awhile he knocked, gently at first, then a little louder.

"Not at home, eh?" muttered Burt. "Pleased with the results of his wooing, Dick is making merry at his favorite chop-house. So much the better for my purpose."

The door was locked, but the detective took from his pocket a bit of steel wire, with which he pushed back the bolt.

Another minute had not elapsed when he stepped forward into an extravagantly-furnished room, into which fell some distance from the step the light of the jet in the hall.

"Somebody's been here!" exclaimed the detective, halting suddenly as he saw evidences of an unlawful visit everywhere. "Probably while Dick Dido was trying to capture Helen, his room had a caller bent on mischief."

On every side was to be seen the work of the plunderer. Drawers stood open with their contents half-way out or wholly on the floor, the bed had been tumbled as if invading hands had searched it without mercy, and pictures hung awry on the walls.

But this was not all the detective saw, though he did not take in everything at a glance.

All at once he caught sight of a figure strangely human on the floor.

In a second he was stooping over it, and when he had dragged it half-way to the door, he saw that he had found Dick Dido, the Broadway Statue.

"The cyclone touched you, eh, Dick?" said the detective.

In response, a singular noise issued from the young rascal's throat, his eyes opened in a wild stare and became fixed on Boffin.

"Is—he—gone?" gasped Dick.

"Is who gone?" asked the detective.

"Old Skinner, the Vulture!" and the Broadway Statue fell back again unconscious.

CHAPTER XI.

JEALOUSY.

THE next day a good-looking woman in a close-fitting traveling suit alighted from the cars in Jersey City and crossed to the New York side by the first boat.

It was Mesa Marx.

If she had successfully completed her Philadelphia business her face did not betray her, but her movements told that she was anxious to reach a certain place as soon as possible.

She went straight from the ferry to the house occupied by Dick Dido the Broadway Statue.

Springing nimbly up-stairs Mesa knocked at the dude's door but got no answer.

She next caught the latch and rattled it.

This noise brought a sallow-faced woman from another part of the house.

"What! don't you know?" cried this person staring at Mesa.

"Don't I know what?"

"Why, what happened last night?"

"How should I?"

"Haven't you seen the papers? It's in them."

By this time Mesa was excited and breathless. "Don't beat the bush any more but go to the center of it. What has happened to Mr. Dido?"

"He met with a misfortune."

"Of what nature?"

"He was robbed. Not only that but he received such treatment that his life is despaired of this minute. They took him to the hospital where he's been going out of one fit into another ever since. I'm very sorry, for he gave this house a great notoriety and he never was behind in his rent either."

"Who robbed him?" queried Mesa.

"Ah! that's what they can't find out while the victim's in his present condition. It's doubtful whether he knows, himself."

"Did you find him in the room?"

"No. A man what wanted to see him on business happened to drop in while he was unconscious. The room was all tore up and looked like a cyclone had passed through it."

"Do they know what was taken?"

"Not exactly. Haven't you been here before?"

"Quite often," smiled Mesa. "Mr. Dido and I are old friends."

"I thought so. Then I have no objections to showing you the room. I've fixed it up since the affair so as to have it presentable to him if he ever comes back."

The landlady took a key from her pocket and opened the door.

"Mebbe you'd like to be alone here?" she said to Mesa.

"If you please, a little while."

When the young woman found herself alone she shut the door and turned on the gas.

The next instant she sprung across the room and bent over the carpet in one corner. Her rapid fingers turned up the end they found and then forced themselves beneath the carpet.

"If Dick did not create a new treasure since my goint away it has been robbed!" she exclaimed, losing some color as she looked up to meet the stare of the bare wall. "I think I could give the police a clew, but, I'm going to work it myself. The absence of certain things which Dick was wont to conceal under the carpet tells me pretty plainly who came here last night. The old rascal has taken the offensive. I told Dick he was apt to do so, but Dick laughed and thought not. I wish I had been here when he came. There would have been a scene not bargained for."

Mesa searched more places than the one under the carpet, but they did not produce any good results.

When she got through she left the room and got away from the house without again encountering the landlady.

On the street below she paused for a moment and then started off.

Another summer day was closing, but the heat remained intense.

Hardly a breath of air was astir in the narrow street, and as Mesa passed along she jostled scores of people flocking to an open quarter where they could get a puff of wind from the bay.

"I'd just like to go in there and show the old Shylock that I'm still on deck!" she exclaimed, halting in front of a certain house which she eyed with a good deal of spirit. "No doubt he's chuckling over his swoop which may cost a human life. I could tell him what I found in Philadelphia and open his eyes. I could show him something and make his heart stand still."

Mesa had stopped in front of Old Skinner's house, the shutters of which were drawn, but beyond the slats she could see several bars of light.

Once she seemed about to ring the bell for she went suddenly toward the step, but she drew off and continued to eye the premises.

"I'll go and look after Dick," she ejaculated.

"I want to be present when he comes to himself if he ever does. He might give something away if not checked and I don't want a detective to have a hand in this affair. I had enough experience with a boy ferret in Philadelphia."

This allusion to Tony Sharp was the first one of the sort that had passed Mesa's lips since her return to New York.

Not long afterward she was admitted to a certain ward in one of the city hospitals where she found a young man asleep on a patient's cot.

The attendant had already told her that Dick

Dido was considerably improved, at which Mesa asked anxiously if he had made any statement.

"He is strangely silent," was the response.

"Thank Heaven!" said the woman, under her breath. "We are still safe, and no detective can keep us from playing our hand out."

At this moment Dick tossed restlessly on the cot.

"Won't I have the dandiest child wife in New York?" he exclaimed. "She promised to decide within twenty-four hours, and I know enough to capture the prize. Then for a merry time, with plenty of cash and a young bride, ha, ha, ha!"

Mesa blanched and looked at the nurse.

"He goes on that way frequently," said the man. "He never talks about any person but the girl who is going to answer a proposal of marriage. His mind seems to run on that altogether."

"Does he ever mention her name?" asked Mesa.

"Frequently."

"What is it?"

"He calls her Helen."

In an instant the woman crimsoned.

"Are you sure he called her Helen?" she exclaimed.

"I can't be mistaken. I've heard it pretty often since they brought him here, and it's always Helen."

Mesa seemed to be suddenly transformed into a statue alongside Dick Dido's cot. Her overheated temples throbbed.

"I gave him his orders before I left and he's disobeyed them!" she thought. "I told him that I would stand no love-making, especially none with the beauty of Blank street."

She turned and looked out of the little hospital window.

"If I had the girl here I'd show her that I'm not in a very good humor!" she continued to herself. "She is the boy's sister, and if not checked now will give us as much trouble as he did."

Here she heard Dick's voice again, and looked at the patient.

The Broadway Statue was going on in the same strain she had just listened to, and it made her flush as before.

"Don't tell him I've been here," she cried, touching the attendant's arm. "He will find it out by and by, and can afford to wait until then."

Mesa went from the hospital to her old quarters—the big frame house in which we introduced her to the reader.

She was watched part of the way by a man who did not lose sight of her until she was fairly in the building.

"So she is back from Philadelphia," chuckled the watcher. "She made a short stay, and her quick return indicates that she was successful. Now when Tony turns up we will have some news. The boy should have come back with her. He knows where to report."

But Boffin, who was Mesa's watcher, left the woman to herself, and hastened to a neat little room on the second floor of a quiet lodging-house.

The brief city twilight had disappeared, and the streets were sown with shadows.

Boffin amused himself over the evening paper while he waited for the boy ferret.

An hour passed and Tony did not come.

"I won't believe that he did not strike Mesa's trail in the Quaker City," he suddenly cried. "Tony knew her destination, for the card that fell out of her sachel at the depot gave it away. Mesa has been back some time. The boy should be here also."

Burt Boffin waited another half-hour and then lost his patience.

"Something's gone wrong," he cried, bounding from his chair. "Mesa is a cunning person who carries claws under the velvet. I told Tony to follow her with eyes wide open. She is capable of doing anything to the person caught on her trail. If she found the boy there—"

He did not complete the sentence, but sprung at the gas, turned it down, and darted from the room.

He acted like a man who did not know just where he was going, and it is likely that he did not.

He went back to the house to which he had tracked Mesa Marx.

The hall door was open and without a moment's hesitation he was on the stairs.

Not until then did he seem to reflect.

"Pshaw! what am I up to?" exclaimed the detective, halting midway on the flight. "She would call me a fool for asking her about Tony, the boy detective, and I would deserve the

name. This is a bad break for me, and I've got to cool off." And he went down and into the street again.

CHAPTER XII.

QUITTING THE MOUSE-TRAP.

MESA MARX had come back to Gotham self-assured that she had left Tony Sharp behind and finally out of the way.

Was she right? Let us see.

The young shadow, who had unwittingly walked into the house in the alley, there to fall into hands which he could not see, was in desperate peril when we saw him last.

When he leaped from the dungeon-like room into the lighted one he expected to continue his flight through the nearest door and thence into the street; but when his red-bearded jailer turned on him and shouted that the door was locked, he felt for a moment that he would sink to the floor.

Having spoken thus the man folded his arms and leaned against the wall with a Satanic grin on his ogreish countenance.

Tony's helpless situation gave him unbounded delight.

The boy prisoner stood erect in the middle of the room and looked at the man at the wall with courage in his mien.

He saw the coil of cord that dangled from his arm, and at once divined the use to which it was to have been put.

"The trap still holds the mouse," suddenly laughed Tony's jailer. "If he will cast his eyes about he will see no hole. Ha, ha! what did he expect to gain by leaping into this room?"

For a moment the boy made no reply.

"You won't get to play spy any more," continued the man, taking a step toward Tony.

"How do you know I played it?"

"You entered this house. You had no right to do that."

"No right when the happiness of mother and sister is at stake?" cried Tony.

"Not even then."

"Very well. Then nobody has a right to fight for his own."

"You have nothing to fight for. You are nothing but a street mouse that squeaks because other people are better off than you are. But," the man showed his yellow teeth again, "you have squeaked for the last time."

Another step on the jailer's part brought the two very close together.

"Don't touch me, sir!" cried the boy, throwing up one hand in an attitude of self-defense.

"Just as if that would make me keep my hands off!" was the reply. "See here! I'm going to wring your neck. A spy's a spy until the cord fixes him. Ha, ha! I've got orders and I'm going to carry them out to the letter."

"Orders from Mesa Marx. I know it."

Tony's enemy bent suddenly forward and the boy saw his greenish eyes snap.

"What did you call her?" he asked.

"Mesa—Mesa Marx."

The man shook his head.

"I don't know her," he said with another grin.

Tony looked at him like a person astounded, but he saw that the man was trifling with him, nothing less.

"Who is Mesa?" resumed the red-beard.

"Never mind," answered the boy. "You know her as well as I do."

"Tell me about her. Where does she live?"

"Not in this city."

"Where, then?"

"In New York."

"Among the big-bugs there?"

"No."

"With the poor?"

"She's not far from some very poor and some very wicked people."

"Does she live alone?"

"Yes."

"Who is her best friend?"

"A man named Jack."

"What is his other name?"

Tony now saw that a sinister motive prompted these rapid inquiries.

A change had come over the man's countenance. The murderous flash had left his eyes and eagerness of another kind was in its place.

"You haven't told me Jack's other name," said the jailer after a moment of silence.

"Do you really want to know it?"

"I do."

"Well, by some he is called Dick Dido."

"What is he like?"

"He plays dude in the sunshine on Broadway. If you have seen dudes you can draw a mental portrait of Mr. Dido."

"Is he young?"

"About twenty one."
"Tall?"
"Rather. He has a good figure and can talk well."

"What sort o' eyes has he?"
"Blue."
"A blue-eyed dude!" and the man laughed.
Tony did not know what to make of this outburst of merriment. Was the red-beard losing his senses?

"So," said he, "so her lover is a dude who poses in the sunshine, eh?"
"He is."

"Where does he live?"
Tony unhesitatingly gave the name of Dick Dido's street.

"Look here. I don't feel like fixing you so much as I did," was the response. "I toss this bit of cord away, thus!" and the coil was thrown into a corner. "If I'd do my duty, I would make this the dearest trap you ever entered, little mouse. In short, I would put an end to your running about o' nights. But you've done me a favor. You have helped Ponchin to a piece of important information."

Ponchin! So that was the man's name. It sounded Russian to Tony, but he did not think the second time about Ponchin's nationality.

"I'm glad I've helped you," remarked Tony.
"So am I."

The man's look showed that he spoke the truth.

"I'm going to unlock the door for you," continued Ponchin. "But you must give a certain promise?"

"What is that?"
"If ever you run across her, and are questioned, you must say that you escaped from this house without collusion."

"I can do that."
"Next—I will exact another promise—you must deliver a sealed letter to Dick Dido, the sun-lizard of New York."

"I'll do that, too."
Ponchin led Tony into an adjoining room, and seated himself at a rickety desk. A short search of the well-stuffed pigeon-holes brought to light several scraps of paper and a piece of green wax.

Then the man bent himself to the task of composing a letter, watched by Tony Sharp with eagerness and curiosity.

After ten minutes Ponchin folded the sheet, and sealed it with the wax in which, while still warm, he left the imprint of his thumb-nail. Then he made a scrawl across the document, and delivered it to Tony with a show of ceremony.

"Don't let it get into the wrong hands," he admonished. "Deliver it to Mr. Dido as soon as possible, and in secret. By Jupiter! one strikes a bonanza nowadays when he does not look for such a thing. You are a free mouse now."

A thrill of pleasure ran through Tony's frame. He did not know how long he had been in the old trap, but he thought that some hours had passed since his capture.

He held out his hand to Ponchin, who took it with another of his peculiar grins, and held it for a moment.

Though the man's hand was dirty, it was as soft as silk, and Tony looked up into his face, wondering for a moment if the red beard and greenish eyes were not a mask hiding the real person.

Eager to quit the house which a short time before he had regarded as a death-trap, the boy ferret started toward the door.

Ponchin sprang up and threw himself in front of him.

"I said I'd open the trap and let the mouse out, and I will!" he smiled, at the same time turning a brass key in its lock.

The following moment Tony felt the fresh air of the summer night on his face, and with a hasty though fervent "Good-by" to Ponchin and a final glance at the interior of the room he was quitting, he vanished amid the shadows of the alley.

Tony found his heart in his throat again, but this time for joy, and he felt like sending up a whoop of victory as he struck the street and caught the gleam of its myriad lamps.

It did not take him long to reappear in the neighborhood of Mrs. Fallowhill's house, but though he watched it for a while he did not catch sight of Mesa Marx. He wondered if the woman, having disposed of him as she thought, had not completed her errand to the Quaker City and gone back to New York.

He had not seen enough of her to fathom the full meaning of her trip, though he knew it was closely connected with the game she was play-

ing for Old Skinner's money. He had not seen her remove the brick from the chimney nor follow Nina Copeland like a shadow of fate through the streets.

Tony lingered near the house some time in hopes that Mesa would appear, but he was disappointed.

At that very moment the schemer of Gotham was a quiet and triumphant passenger on the Night Express flying over the iron rails between the two great cities.

"There seems to be nothing here for me," said Tony, to himself, at last. "Mesa won't oblige me with a glimpse of her face and the folks in Gotham may need me there. I wonder how Old Skinner is coming on, and whether Dick Dido has called on Helen?"

The boy walked toward the depot and soon entered the large waiting-room.

"I know who did it," suddenly exclaimed a voice behind him where the seats were. "If you had choked her when you found her at your heels we wouldn't have lost the prize."

"Never mind," was the response in a woman's voice. "I would know her face among ten thousand. But how did she know we took the document from the chimney?"

"You'll have to ask her."
"I'll not do that, but, as true as I am, Nina Copeland, I'll get them back, or know why not!"

Tony glanced at the speaker. She was young and handsome, and there was a dangerous look in her black eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

MESA FAILS.

OLD SKINNER in his room in New York was taking his ease. He had had an unusually good day on 'change and his private ledger showed a balance on the right side.

He had no notion of going out any more that day, but the prospect of a lucky investment would have tempted him into the streets.

The Vulture of Wall street was quite alone. The deaf servant had retired and the loudest thunder would not have broken her dreams.

All at once the old man started to his feet and stood for a moment at the table with a cold perspiration breaking out on his brow.

His front door had opened. He was conscious of having locked it and he knew that human agency was the only thing that could open it at that time.

Several private papers lay on his table. He hastily snatched these up and thrust them into an inner pocket.

At the same time he heard footsteps in the hall.

Before the old man could prepare to receive the unknown, the library door swung on its hinges and he fell back a step when he found himself confronted by—Mesa Marx.

Her visit to the Quaker City was one of the events which Old Skinner knew nothing about. If he had known of it he might have become a trifle paler, though as his face was, just then, that did not seem possible.

Mesa met the old shark's stare with a provoking smile which did not reassure him. She came forward treading like a cat over the soft carpet and with her eyes fixed upon him.

"What do you want?" ventured Old Skinner, though he could have compressed the object of her visit into one word—money!

"What do you think I want?" answered Mesa.

The miser-broker did not reply.
"I never call unless on business," continued the fair plotter. "It would not do for me to come to your house for nothing. You know that. This is my last call if you play fair with me, Stephen Skinner."

"What do you mean?"

"This," said Mesa, leaning toward him with her hand on the edge of the table. "I want twenty thousand dollars. Not your check, Stephen, but clean cold cash. I don't care how large the bills are so the amount is right. Now, I don't intend to frighten you out of your wits," she laughed at the end of this sentence. "Neither shall I go off without the sum I've named."

"I'm no fountain of gold!" exclaimed Old Skinner. "I don't run my greenbacks like a Government mint."

"No, but you've got enough of them to make a mint."

"I'll keep them, too."

The sinister face of Mesa Marx seemed to creep closer to the sallow features of the old Shylock.

"I've been away," said she.
He looked at her without a word.

"I've been off on a little errand," she went on.

"Indeed? You don't go very often," grinned Old Skinner.

"No," resumed Mesa. "Now, what about the twenty thousand?"

The Wall street Vulture pressed his lips together in a firm resolution.

"I see. You will refuse again."

"Yes, woman. I've got the police on your track."

"Do you mean that?"

"Play your little game and see."

Mesa glanced toward the door which she had left slightly ajar.

"Since you invite me I will play it, Stephen Skinner. Let me see; where shall I begin?"

"Where you will."

The cunning woman seemed to reflect for a moment.

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "There is in Philadelphia a certain house—Number 402. In one of the upper front rooms is an old-fashioned chimney, such as was in vogue when you were a boy, if such people as you ever have any boyhood. In this antique pile of brick is a loose stone and in a niche behind it once lay some important documents. Ho! what is the matter, Old Skinner?"

The New York money shark had started forward and his lower jaw had dropped.

"Shall I have the twenty thousand?" asked Mesa.

"For what?"

"For what I know."

"What do you know?"

She drew off and looked at him, smiling again in her old way.

Old Skinner caught a new breath.

"You know what I said a while ago?" he said to her.

"About having set the police on me?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't care for the police!" blurted Mesa. "I passed that point long ago. I go ahead with my plans just as if there were no such people nearer than London. Let me come to business. I've got the papers that were in the chimney, and more than that, too!"

"I don't want them."

It was Mesa's turn to look startled.

"Come, you can't hoodwink me, Stephen Skinner," she cried. "With those papers I can strip you of every dollar of your wealth and send you up the river, old as you are. Don't shake your head and say I can't. I know that you played cyclone when I was away."

"Me?" innocently asked the old man.

"Stephen Skinner, the man who sits before me! I had not been in the room five minutes before I knew who had been there."

"Now, what do you mean?"

"How innocent you want to be," smiled Mesa. "You pounced upon Dick Dido like a hawk pounces upon a mouse, and having finished him, as you thought, you took everything that suited your fancy, even to a few papers under the carpet."

"Well, hasn't a man a right to recover his own?" snapped Old Skinner.

"His own, eh?"

"Yes," and the old man pushed his body forward. "I got even with the hand that gave me my hurts. Wasn't that fair? No, Mesa Marx, I haven't got twenty thousand dollars for you or any one else!"

"Is this final, Stephen Skinner?"

"It is final."

"Then you will pay more than twenty thousand to Becky Sharp!"

The Vulture of Wall street started as if a knife had pierced him.

"What do you care for Becky Sharp?" he cried, looking at Mesa, who had stepped clear of the table. "That's only a threat to clinch your scheme. I'm not the first man you have blackmailed. Because a man has money must he become the prey of the harpies of New York? That is the way you look at the matter anyway. I don't owe Becky Sharp a dollar, and what I don't owe I won't pay!"

"All right," rejoined the woman, going toward the door. "I'll strip you of more than twenty thousand dollars before I'm done with you! I'll make you earn your bread by the sweat of your brow, and prison bread at that!"

"Go on!" laughed Old Skinner. "I want you to go to the length of your string, and then I'll show my hand!"

The two looked at one another like tigers standing face to face.

It was doubtful which heart thought itself the most triumphant.

Suddenly Mesa raised her hand and covered

the old man in his chair with a finger that quivered.

"You'll hear from me before to-morrow night!" she exclaimed. "We will see whom the police of New York will the most readily obey. Justice didn't get old Fleecer, your Philadelphia lawyer friend, a moment too soon. She reaches out her hand for Stephen Skinner, and a few hours will find that hand at his throat. Then laugh at Mesa Marx if you will. Then say that you are glad you did not pay her twenty thousand dollars for the chimney papers, if you dare! With manacles on your wrists and iron diamonds before your eyes, you will have plenty of time for reflection. Set the police on me, will you? Take care that I don't throw them upon you before you can call one to your assistance!"

She put one hand behind her and opened the door, then, as the other one dropped at her side, she stepped into the hall and vanished.

For a moment Old Skinner seemed to struggle for his breath.

He grew red and white by turns, but all at once he left the chair and bounded across the room.

"Where is the witch?" he cried. "If she drives me to the wall, I'll—I'll—"

He was confronted by Mesa so suddenly that the sentence died on his tongue.

"You will do what?" she queried. "Why don't you finish your sentence, which was a threat?"

The miser-broker sprang at her, but found two hands at his wrists.

"I'm not a child, Stephen Skinner!" she said in his face, and at the same time she pushed him back over the carpet to his chair. "You won't pay me what I ask, eh? You prefer to fight for what you stole years ago, do you? Ah! you want to keep your grip on other people's money! You sha'n't do it! You must pay me twenty thousand dollars, or I'll rob Wall street of its money vulture. I want it now! Count out the cash and go on fleecing your fellow-men; refuse, and take the consequences!"

At this moment Old Skinner sunk into his chair with a half-stifled cry that made Mesa's heart stand still.

A most ghastly hue fastened itself on the banker's cheeks. The plotter of Gotham recoiled and stared at him a second, then, with an exclamation of horror, she fled from the room and left its stricken tenant to himself.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EFFECTS OF A LETTER.

TONY SHARP, mindful of his promise to Ponchin, the keeper of the trap that had caught him in the Quaker City, went straight to Dick Dido's lodgings upon his arrival in New York.

He carried Ponchin's letter sealed with green wax in an inner pocket and was anxious to get shut of it as soon as possible.

But when he reached the house he was informed of Dick's misfortune and told that he would find the Broadway Statue at the hospital.

"So somebody came down on the dude did he?" exclaimed the boy shadow, departing with the landlady's story running through his head. "I think I could guess without much trouble, but I won't express my opinion of the affair."

He soon presented himself at the threshold of the accident ward and was told that Mr. Dido had just departed, having recovered from his severe choking.

A singular thrill swept over the boy's frame. "A few minutes too late, but never mind, I'll find him!" he murmured, retracing his steps. "I will go home now and see how affairs are there. Then for Burt Boffin and an exchange of views."

He was not so sure that he would not find the city detective at his home in consultation with his mother and Helen, but when he entered the hallway he was surprised to hear a voice which he thought he recognized.

Tony went forward another step and was sure that he had not guessed wrongly.

The very man he had sought at the hospital was then in the house!

"I had a pretty good shaking-up, but I'm over it now," laughed the voice. "You see I was looking for nothing of the kind, though I thought something startling might happen."

"Did you lose much?" asked Helen's voice.

"Not a great deal. I might have lost my life, you know."

"Yes, yes."

"If I had I would not be here now reminding you of your promise."

If Tony could have looked into the room at that moment he would have seen a deep and indignant flush on his sister's face.

"Of course you have made up your mind," continued Dick Dido.

"I have."

"Well, let me have the decision. I'm a fellow who don't believe in much ceremony."

A second's silence ensued.

"I cannot become your wife, Mr. Dido," replied Helen in firm tones.

"You can't, eh?" broke forth the dude, raising his voice. "Surely, you haven't forgotten what I said when I was here last?"

"I have forgotten nothing."

"You don't know what you're missing. You are poor enough now, and it is in my power to keep you where you are, or to make you shine out like a queen."

"I can't help that. You asked for my answer, and I have given it."

"Then you want to be poor!" cried the Broadway Statue. "You want to see your mother nurse sick people for a mere pittance; you desire to keep your brother on the street following like a cur at the heels of the police. If you don't reconsider your decision you shall get lower still. I can bring you down another notch!"

The last word was still on Dick Dido's tongue when the door at his back opened suddenly, and he found himself confronted by the young detective.

"The cur is at some one else's heels just now!" cried Tony, his figure drawn proudly up and fire in his eyes. "You need not put yourself to any trouble to fetch us down another notch. If Helen should choose for a husband the man in your clothes she would find herself disowned by the only brother she has in the world. You don't need to flash in the pan as I see you're getting ready to do. When I have delivered a certain message that I carry you can get out of this house and remain away. To know you thoroughly is to despise you. We don't want dudes around here."

Dick Dido who had colored to the temples saw Tony thrust his hand into his bosom and draw forth a letter. He started a little at sight of it, though he did not suspect its authorship, and took it quickly when it was extended.

"Who gave you this?" he inquired.

"I guess the signature will tell you."

Dick broke the waxen seal and opened the letter. Tony and his sister watched him intently.

All at once the dude's face grew pale and he was seen to recoil a step.

Ponchin's letter seemed to be of more than passing importance.

It was not long, though its composition had occupied the red-bearded rascal considerable time, but he had evidently chosen the right words and said not one amiss.

Dick's hands trembled as he folded the letter.

"Did he give you this himself?" he asked.

"He did."

"How did he come to find you?"

"Never mind that."

"Does he live alone?"

"I think he does."

The Broadway Statue put the letter away in his pocket.

"You know the rules now," continued Tony. "This house wants nothing more to do with you."

Dick looked sharply at the boy, but did not respond.

The startling effects of Ponchin's letter had not passed off.

"There are some things to be discussed in the future," he said to Helen from the door where he halted a moment before going out.

"That's enough, sir!" cried Tony, stepping forward. "Yes, some things *will* be discussed in the future and you are not likely to come out of the discussion in very good shape, either."

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see," replied Tony, with a wave of his hand.

Dick Dido jerked the door open and left so hurriedly that he did not bid Helen good-night.

"Who looked for two thunderbolts in one night?" he exclaimed, when he struck the sidewalk. "The last person from whom I expected to hear sends me a letter by the very boy I did not want to meet. The boy has been in Philadelphia. Did he follow Mesa off? I wonder how he knew Ponchin was there?"

Talking thus to himself Dick Dido went back to his room which he had not visited since he had his encounter with Old Skinner who had choked and robbed him.

He found the apartment restored to its original condition by his landlady who insisted on congratulating him and explaining everything in her garrulous way.

Dick was in hasty humor and cut her off without any apology.

He had something important on his mind.

"I've got to see this wretch, Ponchin," he cried. "Just when I want to do something else, I have to go to Philadelphia and listen to him. I thought he was out of the way. I never dreamed that he would find me. It was through that boy—the cur who follows at the heels of the police!"

Dick took a small valise from his wardrobe and threw a few articles into it.

Then he donned some garments that broke his dudish appearance. He pulled a soft hat over his eyes and gave his mustache a fresher black tint.

"If I can get to the cars without being seen I'm all right," he thought. "I'll come back victorious. I will bet my head on that."

He went down upon the street and hailed the first cab he saw.

"To the Jersey City Ferry," he said getting inside and away he went.

Arrived at the landing, he jumped out, paid his fare and went aboard the boat. With his hat still over his eyes, he passed through the men's cabin and sought the crowd on the planks beyond. Dick was impatient. He thought he never knew a ferry-boat to be so long in starting.

At last the wheels began to move and they were off.

"Going away, eh?" suddenly whispered a voice at his elbow.

If a pistol had been fired over his shoulder Dick would not have given a quicker start.

He whirled and looked wildly around.

"Ah! I see! you are going off and no mistake," continued the same voice and at the same time the speaker glanced at the grip in the dude's hand.

A cold horror seemed to settle over Dick's hopes.

He was confronted by a nice-looking man of forty or so and the observation had left a smile on his face.

"Don't let me excite you, sir," the stranger went on laying one of his hands softly on Dick's shoulder. "You are going to Philadelphia. So am I. We will travel together and make a double call on Ponchin."

Dick's eyes flashed up suddenly and he drew back, but did not escape the hand on his shoulder.

"I guess I'll travel alone!" cried he.

"I think not, Mr. Dido," was the quick and firm response. "You will consider yourself entirely in my charge. Of course you know me, therefore it is quite unnecessary for me to announce that I am Burt Boffin, a detective!"

It was "quite unnecessary" for the speaker to say anything of the kind.

Dick Dido's countenance was proof enough of this. He looked out upon the river through which the boat was plowing its way, and all at once a strange light lit up his eyes.

Was he about to leap over the chain and throw himself into the water?

As if he thought so, Burt Boffin allowed his hand to close gently on Dick's arm.

CHAPTER XV.

MESA'S BOLD HAND.

If Mesa Marx had been asked in what condition she had left Old Skinner, she would have been compelled to say dead!

The ghastliness of the old man's face, his position in the chair, in short, everything strengthened this belief.

The sudden shock of her excited action, the forcing of him across the room, seemed to have snapped the brittle chord of life, and left the Vulture of Wall street powerless to fleece any one.

Mesa went directly to the big tenement, and thence to her own quarters therein.

"Nobody saw me enter Old Skinner's house," said she to herself, when she had taken sober second breath. "I am sure no one was around when I came out, so why should I let my heart get up into my throat at a little thing like this? If he is dead, why I can sell my secret to the person who gets his pile. If he recovers, I will have another chance at him. Dead, the police won't bother me; alive, he won't set them on me as he threatened. I'm safe!"

This was a satisfactory conclusion for Mesa to reach.

She wanted to hear from the man she had lately left. As long as she remained where she was she would hear nothing. She dressed and went out.

As a matter of course, her feet wandered back to Old Skinner's neighborhood. She saw the house as grim and quiet as ever, with not the shadow of excitement about it.

The miser-broker was not dead, and she would have another chance at his purse.

Of course Mesa did not investigate beyond the door.

She contented herself with an outward inspection, which was the least she could do.

All this time she was watched by a boy, who kept himself as secluded as possible.

Tony Sharp had, by the merest luck, caught sight of Mesa's flitting figure, and had followed her like a true street fox.

He knew nothing concerning her interview with Old Skinner.

He had just finished a bout with Dick Dido in his (Tony's) own home, and had sent Burt Boffin, whom he encountered on the street, after the young man.

As the detective was after Dick, he could look after Mesa.

Tony watched the young woman, until she turned from Old Skinner's house, coming toward him, as if she had suddenly caught sight of him, and was determined to run him down.

The boy managed to elude her, and when she had passed, he followed as before.

"I would like to know what Mesa took from the Philadelphian whom I heard talk so plainly in the depot," murmured Tony. "She came over in the same car that carried me and when she thought I wasn't looking I saw her eyes flash several times. Mesa got the best of her somehow, and if they happen to collide, there will be a scene. Mrs. Copeland is a determined looking young woman, quite equal to the task of taking care of herself. So is Mesa, and that's why I'd like to see 'em meet."

Tony had scarcely finished ere he saw a figure dart from a doorway and take after Mesa.

"It is she now!" he exclaimed quickening his speed. "Think about a certain person and he's sure to turn up."

Though the boy shadow could not see the face of Mesa's pursuer, her figure was enough to identify her in his mind. She was swift of foot and almost noiseless and while Tony gazed she came down upon Mesa like an angel of doom.

Mesa moved along totally unconscious of the approach. They were many feet behind her. Why should she have a pursuing enemy among them?

Suddenly Nina was seen to reach Mesa's side.

"Now for a collision!" cried Tony. "I want to be near enough to hear what they say."

The plotter of Gotham was seen to look round the moment Nina came up. She started violently and then fell back.

"I've found you!" said the Quaker City woman, and at the same time her hand closed on Mesa's wrist. "Don't try to get away or deny that I have caught the right person. If you do either I will call the police and hand you over on a charge that will finish you for a long time. You've robbed me."

"Me? When?"

"A few hours ago in Philadelphia."

Mesa affected to laugh derisively.

"You can't laugh it down," Nina went on. "I know what I'm talking about, and I've been hot on your track ever since. You know what you took. Hand back the property."

The two women gave each other look for look.

"Do you want to attract a crowd?" resumed Nina. "We are seen already. Give me the papers?"

"What papers?"

"The ones you took from me."

"What right had you to them?"

"The right of discovery. We found them."

"We?"

"My husband and I. We found them in the chimney. You came a little too late."

Mesa did not reply.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nina.

"I can't surrender that which I have not got."

"You mean not here?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"At my room."

Nina doubted; her looks told Mesa this.

"Where do you live?" she inquired.

"Perhaps you know; you say you've been hot on my trail."

"I don't know. Is it far from here?"

"Not very far."

"Then take me to your room. Remember, no double game. You shall not cheat me out of what I've won. At the first sign of treachery I'll make this affair cost you more than you care to pay. Which way?"

The two women started off, followed by Tony, who wanted to see the end of the play.

Mesa's errand to the Quaker City had ended successfully, though she had to perpetrate a theft to bring it about. She had intended to extract certain valuable documents from a chimney, but Nina Copeland had forestalled her. But a later move had obtained the prize. She had robbed Nina.

All this was plain to Tony Sharp. The overheard conversation of the two women had made it so.

He kept after them, not losing them for a moment.

Mesa was guiding Nina to the street where she occupied quarters in the big frame house. She seemed eager to reach her destination, as if she expected to turn the tables there.

"Is this the house?" asked Nina, looking up at the structure when Mesa halted before it.

"I live here."

"On which floor?"

"The third."

Nina Copeland appeared to hesitate, but for a moment only.

"Go on!" she ordered, firmly. "I can climb as high as you lead."

The two entered the building.

"The tug of war will come in Mesa's room!" exclaimed Tony. "She no more intends to surrender her prize than she hopes to fail at the end of her game."

The two women vanished beyond the threshold. Becky Sharp's boy slipped into the same place and stopped in the shadow of the door.

He waited until he no longer heard footsteps on the stairs, then he began to climb the steps.

"On the third floor, Mesa said," he thought. "It won't be hard to find them there."

Several minutes afterward the young shadow stood in a dim hall on the third landing.

He looked ahead and saw a light flash suddenly beyond a transom, and in a jiffy he was there.

"Now, let me have them," he heard a voice say.

It was Nina's.

He could see nothing by means of the keyhole, so he threw up his hands and caught the top frame of the door.

He drew his body up and ventured to look into the room beyond.

Mesa and Nina stood face to face.

"What are you going to do with the chimney papers?" demanded Miss Marx.

"That's my secret."

"You can't bleed Old Skinner with them. He'll set the police on you."

"Maybe I don't intend to bleed him."

"What, then?"

"I guess those papers will do delayed justice to a needy family. They are the documents which, if in Old Skinner's possession, would perpetuate the old shark's grip on other people's money. I don't know how they got in the chimney. I know we found them there and that is enough. Old Skinner can turn the police on me if he wants to, but he would better not."

Mesa stepped toward a small bureau in one corner of the room. Nina's eyes followed her as she opened a drawer and dropped her hand into it.

The very movement told that she was making a bold play.

The next instant a cry parted Tony's lips.

As quick as a flash Mesa Marx had wheeled with a revolver in her white hand.

"Get out of this house!" she exclaimed, covering Nina with the weapon. "I'll count three for you. If you are here then, I'll kill you in your tracks! Give up the chimney papers! I'd as soon think of surrendering my life!"

It was the most thrilling tableau Tony Sharp had ever seen.

His hands slipped from the cross-bar overhead and he dropped to the floor like a cat.

CHAPTER XVI.

TONY SCORES A POINT.

It was the boy shadow's intention to rush into the room and prevent a tragedy, for there was desperation in Mesa's eyes.

On the other hand, Nina did not exhibit any signs of fear, but stood erect before the fair plotter and looked her squarely in the face.

For a moment after Mesa's last words silence reigned beyond the door, then Tony, with his hand on the latch ready to rush forward, heard her voice again.

"What are you going to do?" asked Mesa. "This is no child's play. I don't intend to be followed by you nor by any one else. I shall count three as I said a moment ago. One—two—"

The second number brought a footstep toward the door where Tony listened.

"You can drive me off, but you can't keep me there," said Nina Copeland. "If you think you are to retain possession of the chimney papers, as you call them, you may find yourself mistaken."

"You cannot get them!"

"I have made no such boast."

"It would be a foolish one if you did."

The footsteps came nearer and Tony Sharp drew back.

A second later and Nina stepped into the hall, not seeing the sharp-eyed boy who hugged the shadows at her right and adroitly kept his body from view.

He saw her send a parting look full of resentment into the room she had just left, and then she hurried toward the staircase baffled by a pistol in the hands of Mesa Marx.

Tony was about to vacate his position when Mesa's figure darkened the doorway. She looked madly after Nina with the deadly weapon clutched tightly in her hand, but her baffled rival had already disappeared.

"She played and lost!" laughed Mesa, in audible tones. "I'd like to see her rob me. Some people can turn the tables, but she is not one of that kind. Will she come back at me? I want to see her try!"

The woman vanished and the door shut with a bang.

Tony Sharp did not lose a second after this in a vigorous pursuit of Nina. He sprang down the steps to the street and caught sight of her moving away in the gaslight.

It did not take him long, agile as he was, to overtake her, and his touch made her start and change color.

"She frightened you off, eh?" exclaimed the boy, looking up with a smile into Nina's face. "Well, I can't say that I blame you, for there was 'shoot' in Nina's eye."

His words seemed to render Nina speechless.

"Who frightened me off?" stammered the Quaker City woman though she had just heard Mesa's name mentioned.

"Come, come. I saw about all of the fight," smiled Tony in return. "I wish you would tell me something, and I think you will when I tell you who I am."

"Well, who are you?"

"Tony Sharp."

Nina's eyes oiled with amazement.

"Becky Sharp's boy?" she cried.

"Yes."

The face into which the young detective looked seemed to soften.

At any rate, it lost some of its reserve.

"What do you want to know?" continued

Nina.

"Something about the chimney papers."

The Philadelphia woman started slightly.

"You don't want Mesa Marx to keep them and win the game do you?" exclaimed Tony.

"No, no!"

"She got ahead of you awhile ago, and she may do it again if you have nobody to help you."

"She had a pistol. I had none."

"And if you hadn't taken sober second thought you would not be here talking to me. The woman—Mesa Marx—is desperate. It is a fortune or a prison with her, and she knows it, too."

Nina eyed the boy closely while he spoke and almost before he had finished her hand encircled his arm.

"If I could believe that you are Becky Sharp's boy—" she began when Tony interrupted her:

"Let me take you home and show you mother and sister Helen!" he cried.

"No, not now," was the response. "I will believe you."

"And you will tell me what the chimney papers say, won't you?"

Nina seemed a long time answering the boy.

"I don't know but what I should," said she.

Tony's eyes brightened.

"Where can we go?" continued Nina.

The boy shadow looked about them and espied just ahead the benches and trees of an open square.

"We can take one of the benches over there," he suggested, and Nina nodded approval.

A brief time sufficed to seat them in a secluded part of the little park, and Tony was all attention, waiting for the young woman to speak.

"I am obliged to tell you from memory," she began. "In the first place, my husband, Asa Copeland, is a gambler. He now and then gets possession of some odd secrets which he uses to his own advantage when he can. I don't know how he discovered that there was a secret connected with a certain old house on Blank street, Philadelphia, but discover it he did."

"Well, one day we took up our abode in the house. It had had many tenants in its time, among them a certain lawyer, who was killed by the cars years ago. This lawyer, whose name was Fleecer, had no good reputation for honesty, and a good many of his clients were no better than he was. My husband and I searched the old house from cellar to garret for its secret. He said he knew it was there, because he once saw a well-known old miser of New York visit it several times."

"Was it Old Skinner?" cried Tony.

Nina smiled and proceeded.

"This old fellow searched the house with all the shrewdness he could employ, but he found nothing. While we did the same we came across many evidences of his hunt and they kept our courage up. At last my husband began on the old-style chimney in one of the upper rooms. It was like looking in a desert for water, but he was not discouraged. We found where somebody before us had been tampering with the bricks, and we did the same.

"At length Asa pulled out one of them. There seemed to be a hole behind it. He thrust his hand in and, with an exclamation of victory, pulled out a package of old papers, tied with a leathern string. Of course we regarded the secret solved, and in a little while were devouring the contents of the documents. They dated far back beyond my time and yours, boy. They were title deeds to certain property, and among them we found an old will which left to one Rebecca Joyce and her heirs a sum of money which was quite large."

"My grandmother's name was Rebecca Joyce and my mother's before her marriage was the same!" cried Tony.

"That is what we found out afterward," resumed Nina. "We—my husband and I—put this and that together and ascertained that Old Skinner was once Jabez Fleecer's client, that they worked together a good many years ago, that from that time the old broker prospered. He got a good deal of money from somewhere and somehow, but all the time something troubled him. Why, we even discovered that he took possession of certain property by showing some title deeds that puzzled the courts."

"Of course he did!" exclaimed Tony. "Mother has told me how she disputed his claim at the time. She always said that the title deeds were forgeries—the clever work of Jabez Fleecer—but she could not prove it. But I think the chimney's secret has made it clear."

"So do I," exclaimed Nina, with a smile. "I believe that the genuine deeds and the will passed into our hands, to be adroitly stolen by Mesa Marx. They were the documents she guarded so well to-night, and it is no wonder that she would as soon surrender her life as them. With them don't you see how she can bleed Old Skinner, and eventually strip him of his wealth?"

"What did you intend to do with the papers?" asked Tony.

Nina Copeland recoiled from the boy. It was a shot direct, and one that went home.

"Never mind that," said she. "What I desire now is to get ahead of Mesa Marx. I want nothing better. She is bound to win, but she shall not."

"No, she shall not!" echoed Tony Sharp. "As it is, she has final possession of the missing papers. She holds the fatal club over Old Skinner's head. He does not know that she has the true title deeds. He evidently believes that the old house in Philadelphia still contains its secret. Mesa won't hesitate to use her new power. She has the cards in her hands to-night, but as true as I am Tony Sharp, she shall fail."

"I would go through fire to baffle her now," cried Nina. "I confess that my husband and I were going to play a different game with the papers, but all that is past. I intend to help Becky Sharp and her children."

"If you do you won't regret it," answered Tony. "But we must not make one bad move. Mesa will not let us succeed if she can help it."

"Of course not."

"If she destroys the chimney papers, all is lost."

Nina Copeland's cheeks got pale.

"Boffin is chasing Dick Dido, the dude, and Mesa's friend," continued the boy. "What we do now must be done without his help. I see clearly the difficulties and dangers that beset us, but I am going to push things from this moment."

CHAPTER XVII.

A HARD BARGAIN.

TONY, the boy shadow, had scored a good point in his own judgment, and Mesa had scored one in hers.

The latter had driven Nina off at the muzzle of her revolver, and the prize she had obtained in the Quaker City she still held.

Her first move after her success was to prepare for the final play which would end the game and feather her nest, as the saying goes, in a substantial manner.

She did not know that Burt Boffin, the detective, was forcing Dick Dido on to Philadelphia, and to the abode of the strange man Ponchin, who had sent to him a startling message by Tony.

"I think she will not follow me any more. She knows by experience that I know how to turn the tables on her. The next time she might not get off so easily. Be careful, Nina Copeland. Go back to Quakerdom and let me alone!"

Thus Mesa communed with herself while she walked away from her house with the papers she had defended with the revolver in her bosom.

At the same time Tony was talking with Nina in the Park, and the young woman from Philadelphia was telling the story we have just heard.

The chimney papers had fallen into her hands with all their value. She had now the key to the game and Old Skinner, the Wall street Vulture—the man who had robbed people for years—would have to give her an enormous sum for her secret.

"I guess I didn't leave the old man dead, after all," she went on. "I will now show him what I have, and he shall pay a good price for it, or I'll drive a bargain with the other side."

Did Mesa mean that she would try to sell her secret to Becky Sharp in case she failed with Old Skinner?

We will see.

She kept on toward the old man's house until she once more stood before it.

The next moment the front door opened and Stephen himself came out.

Mesa could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the Vulture of Wall street walking down the street at a brisk pace with his hat drawn over his brows. He did not seem to notice any one, though he might have seen the sharp-eyed woman if he had glanced around.

In an instant Mesa was after him, stepping lightly and gliding away like a pursuing phantom.

To her astonishment he led her to her own neighborhood, and her wonder increased when she saw the old man dodge into the big frame building.

"Aha! the old rat has taken sober second breath!" exclaimed the woman as she followed Old Skinner into the hall and thence upstairs. "Maybe he is willing to pay me the twenty thousand now; but he is apt to learn that I have raised my figures."

The old Shylock mounted to the third floor and went straight to Mesa's door. Of course it was locked.

He rapped several times, but got no reply. Mesa standing in the shadows a few feet away watched him with a great deal of interest.

Just as Old Skinner was turning away with disappointment visible on his countenance, Mesa tripped forward and touched his arm.

The miser-broker fell back with a sharp cry.

"You want to see me, don't you?" remarked Mesa, and before Old Skinner could reply she rattled on: "I've been out, and it is luck that I find you here."

She unlocked her door and passed into the little room with the old man, the door locking itself with a catch lock as it swung to.

There was anxiety and eagerness on Old Skinner's face when the fair schemer of Gotham turned on him in the light.

"I want to see your proof," began the miser-broker.

"My proof of what?"

"What! have you forgotten so soon?" ejaculated Stephen.

"No, no. I was only a bit thick-headed, nothing more," and Mesa laughed. "Well, I have the proof."

"Let me see it."

She went to a bureau at one side of the room and pretended to take something out of one of the drawers when, in reality, she drew a paper from her bosom.

"The proof is it?" she continued, coming back to the nervous old fellow whose eyes immediately sought the package in her hand. "I half believe that you have thought that I could not make good my words."

At the same time she partly unfolded the document which she extended. Old Skinner's eyes seemed about to pop from his head.

"My God!" he cried turning pale. "I did not think you had that!"

"Ha! I thought you did not," responded Mesa.

"How many have you?"

"All!" answered the woman boldly.

"Does your answer include the—?"

"Yes, the will, too," was the interruption which took an important word from Old Skinner's tongue.

The Wall street Shylock looked at Mesa in blank amazement.

"Do you still hold them at the figures you have mentioned?" he queried.

"No. I have raised."

Her reply took the old man's breath.

"How much?" he ventured.

"I won't sell a single document for less than fifty thousand."

In a second Stephen Skinner was on his feet. He quivered from head to foot.

"You want to send a man to the Poor-house!" he exclaimed. "I've dealt with unreasonable people before, but you take the prize."

Mesa said nothing, but laughed quietly, looking at the old man at the same time as if she enjoyed his fright.

"You don't have to buy," she said at length.

"You know what I ask for the papers. There's another market for them."

"Another market?" echoed Old Skinner.

"That's what I said."

"I'd like to know where it is."

"Think a moment."

"Oh!" he cried. "The other market isn't able to pay you a tithe of the robber-sum you have demanded. Besides, Becky Sharp has no claim on anything I have—"

"Who said anything about Becky Sharp?" put in Mesa.

The old fellow recoiled, as if he had caught himself in a trap of his own setting.

"Well, since you have mentioned her, I'll be plain and say that she would like to have these papers," the woman continued. "Let me see. They call for some very valuable property here and in Philadelphia, all of which is now controlled by one Stephen Skinner, who holds fraudulent deeds for the same."

Old Skinner winced.

"And yet you refuse to pay out of your immense wealth the sum of fifty thousand for papers which can send you up the river for the remainder of your days. Stephen Skinner, do you want to wear a convict's garb?"

The miser shook his head and glanced again at the paper still in Mesa's hand.

"Won't you take less?" he asked.

"No! I'll add a thousand every ten minutes," replied the woman. "I know the worth of my goods, and the purse of the man I'm dealing with."

Old Skinner remained silent for a moment.

"You didn't get much when you robbed Dick Dido," said Mesa.

"I got all he had," grinned the old man.

"Well, that wasn't much!" laughed the Gothamite. "You simply recovered that which had been taken from you. If you had found the deeds there you would have achieved a victory. You will find writing materials on the table if you want to pay part of the bargain in a check."

Stephen Skinner seemed to shrink from the table, though he looked at it, watched closely all the time by Mesa Marx.

"If I purchase what?" he suddenly asked.

"Why the documents are yours."

"Every one?"

"Yes."

"There are no copies?"

"None."

Mesa's answers, promptly given, appeared to satisfy him. Shutting his teeth hard like one forced to a very unpleasant duty, Old Skinner went to the table and laid upon it a large pocket-book well-stuffed with bills.

Then he took from another pocket a check-book which he opened before him and took up a pen.

"I'm going to have no half-way business about this affair," he said, poising the pen above the blank check while he looked up into Mesa's face.

"I want to see the documents."

In another minute the woman laid before him half a dozen legal-looking papers. The old man pounced upon them like an eagle, and his deep-set eyes got a triumphant glitter.

Mesa let him look at the papers a few moments and then addressed him.

"Are you satisfied?" she inquired.

"They seem to be all here."

As he spoke he gathered up the papers and was about to transfer them to an inner pocket

when Mesa's hand darted forward and closed on his wrist.

"Not so fast, old man!" she exclaimed. "I'll see my way clear to the fifty thousand before you claim the prize."

He dropped the papers and studied her glittering eyes a moment then began to fill up the check before him.

Mesa, watching the pen in its every move, saw that the check was for thirty thousand dollars.

"There must be twenty thousand in the pocketbook," thought she, and there was.

Three minutes later Old Skinner had the chimney papers next his heart and with a deep chuckle of satisfaction he went down the stairs, feeling that he had won the battle and could now defy Becky Sharp and the world.

But justice was at his heels.

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOW TONY PUSHED THINGS.

LONGING to make the play he had in mind, Tony Sharp did not go home to acquaint his mother and Helen with the narrative he had heard from Nina Copeland's lips.

He dismissed Nina when she had finished her story, and went straight to Mesa's domicile.

Some time had elapsed since he last saw the fair plotter of Gotham, after she had driven Nina off at the muzzle of her revolver, and during that period she had transacted some very important business with Old Skinner.

This business we have just witnessed.

Tony knew nothing of the affair which had been concluded some time when he reached Mesa's house.

Not finding her at home, he was nonplused for a few moments.

He seemed to have lost an important link in the chain.

He did not know where to look for Mesa, but his promise to Nina that he would "push things," stirred him to action.

Boffin the detective had followed Dick Dido, and Tony could look for no assistance in that direction.

After a short deliberation under the gaslight, the young ferret started off up-town.

"If I cannot find Mesa I may block her game in another direction," thought he. "She will try to sell the papers to Old Skinner, and the moment the old shark gets them he will give them to the fire."

A few moments later Tony turned up in front of the miser-broker's house.

He saw by the window that a light was in the library.

Was Old Skinner there?

Approaching the shutters with the noiseless tread of a spy, Tony looked into the room, and saw the object of his solicitude at the table, looking over a lot of papers, a glimpse of which made his (Tony's) eyes glisten.

"As I live, the trade has been made!" he exclaimed, almost falling from his perch. "Mesa did not let grass grow under her feet after her bout with Nina. She has sold the documents to the old fellow, and skipped with the proceeds. And there is a fire in the grate. A fire on a warm night like this!"

The boy mounted the front steps and turned the knob. As he had expected, the door was locked.

Old Skinner was not going to take chances with an unlocked door with the prize, lost so long, but his at last, in his hands.

Turning from the door, the boy made his way to the cramped backyard of the property. It looked very much like playing burglar, but Tony was not to be turned aside by the resemblance. There was too much at stake.

As if to baffle him, he found the rear doors of the old house as immovable as the front one.

"The old servant can't hear me," murmured Tony, "and Stephen Skinner is very busy where I saw him last. I can afford to take the chances."

He managed to get into the house by a window whose lower sash yielded to his hands, and in a short time he found himself under Old Skinner's roof.

Tony reached the dimly lighted hall, and crept up the staircase to a spot from whence he could see the bent figure of the miser of Gotham still gloating over the papers for which he had just paid so much.

It was a sight that made Tony Sharp's heart beat faster than it had ever beat before.

He knew that the documents which would give his mother her stolen fortune—stolen by Old Skinner—were within a few feet of him, that Mesa had placed them in the Wall street Vulture's hands for a certain sum, and that without

them he could not hope to convict the guilty and make all things even.

For some time he watched the old man through the transom, nor did he go down the stairs until he was calm and ready for the work before him.

Halting at the door as he laid his hand on the knob, Tony listened a few seconds, but all was quiet beyond the threshold.

When he turned the bronzed knob gently he found that the door would open.

A moment afterward he stood in the library. Old Skinner sat at the table with the door almost entirely at his back.

He could not have seen the boy shadow with-turning his head and he did not seem inclined to take his eyes from the papers long enough to do this.

Tony watched him a few seconds with an eager smile on his face.

Just beyond the old fellow a fire leaped up above the irons of the grate rendering the room uncomfortably close. It told Tony why it had been built, for ever and anon the broker glanced toward it as if to see whether it still burned.

When the boy went forward it was straight toward Old Skinner, but behind his back. He made no noise on the thick carpet that covered the floor, and his eyes did not for a moment lose sight of his prey.

Step by step he neared the Wall street Shylock and at last, rising on tip-toe, he looked down over his shoulder.

The yellowish hands of Old Skinner held the last paper of the lot. The others lay on the table at his right and the leather string with which they had been tied was coiled beside them.

"They're worth it—every dollar of the sum!" said the old man in audible tones. "I guess they're all here, too! She said so and I looked 'em over before I paid her a dollar. But I've done another fine thing. By Jupiter! she'll open her eyes when she goes to the bank to-morrow to cash the big check. Julius, the cashier, will refuse to pay it. I'll have the papers and be thirty thousand ahead, besides. No, I won't have the papers, either. They'll be ashes! Then Becky Sharp and her spawn can talk all they please. They won't frighten me any more. As for the boy—if he badgers me I'll close on him in a way he won't like! Mesa Marx, I beat you after all. Old Skinner grows keener as the years roll on. I don't care what they call me now. Vulture of Wall street? Ha, ha! that's all right!"

He folded the last paper and picked up those on the table.

Bunching the whole lot, he turned to the fire with a gleam of victory in his eyes.

The next moment the hand of Tony Sharp came down over his shoulder like a young jaguar.

It closed on the papers and with a vigorous jerk tore them from Old Skinner's clutch.

A startling cry parted the broker's lips.

He was on his feet in an instant and as Tony fell back with the prize gained, he saw the flashing eyes and the quivering form of the man who had lost.

"You? you, is it?" cried Old Skinner, stammering in his rage. "What do you expect to make by this piece of thievery? Here! give me back those papers, or I'll make you wish you had never seen the light of day!"

But the boy ferret stood off between the old man and the door with the papers held in a way which told that what he had won he intended to hold.

All at once Stephen Skinner darted toward Tony, but the boy threw up his hand and waved him off.

"Sing Sing if you advance another step!" he cried. "I have been on the trail a long time and there have been many turns in it, but the last one has been reached. The person who sold you these papers had no right to them, and you knew it when you bought. She stole them—took them from the person who found them in the Quaker City chimney. I know their value. They will give my mother her own, besides vindicating her good name, for years ago you held her up to ridicule by saying that no such papers existed. No, Stephen Skinner, you can't compromise with me. I am not Mesa Marx. I don't find papers to sell them to you. I will let the law give us all we are entitled to. Try to stop me—attempt to keep me in this house, and I will sound an alarm that will baffle you."

The Vulture of Wall street faced the boy shadow white with rage and fear.

"What are you going to do?" he finally asked.

"I shall take nothing that is not ours."

The old man fell back and dropped into the chair.

"I'll give you half I'm worth for the papers in your hand," said he.

"No! As I have told you, I am not Mesa Marx."

"Then, go!"

When Tony reached the street he looked back at the house fully expecting to see the figure of its evil genius rushing down upon him.

Instead he saw the light in the library suddenly disappear, and then he hastened away with a fortune in his bosom.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BOY SHADOW WINS.

THE next morning, a few minutes after nine, a neatly dressed woman with a quick step tripped into one of the prosperous banks of Broadway. A good many people knew that Old Skinner could draw on the institution to nearly an unlimited amount, and perhaps it was the possession of knowledge of this sort that lent a sparkle of satisfaction to the lady's eyes.

At any rate she walked to the cashier's window and threw down an indorsed check with an air of confidence.

The cashier picked it up, glanced at it a moment and then fixed his gaze on his customer.

"We can't pay this, miss," said he.

The young woman started.

"Isn't it regular?" she asked a quaver of fear in her voice.

"We have our orders; we can't pay it."

The face before the bank window flushed.

"Stephen Skinner filled it out and signed it," cried she.

"Correct."

"He has funds here?"

"Yes."

"Then—"

"Your pardon, miss," said a strange voice at the woman's elbow at this moment. "Aren't you Miss Mesa Marx?"

"What if I am?" demanded the perturbed customer who was our old friend of the big frame tenement.

"Then, I have orders to arrest you."

Mesa fell back, clutching Old Skinner's check, and stared at the speaker.

"What am I to be arrested for?" she exclaimed.

"For theft for one thing," was the reply.

"Who brings the charge?"

"Nina Copeland."

All color left Mesa's face.

The Philadelphia woman had dealt a return blow.

Beating down her anger and fear as best she could she turned to the bank cashier.

"Tell me why you refused to pay the check I presented awhile ago," said she.

There was still demand in her tones.

The man behind the strong wirework at the little window smiled blandly.

"Every dollar of Stephen Skinner's money in this bank stands attached."

"Attached by whom?"

"By Mrs. Rebecca Sharp and her heirs. The papers were served on us yesterday."

Mesa put the check in her pocket and was seen to smile.

"I am ready," she went on, addressing the officer who had waited for her coming, in citizen's clothes. "I am wanted for theft, am I? Arrested on the oath of a woman who is a thief herself!"

"I know nothing about that, miss."

Twenty minutes afterward a boy walked into a small room where the fair schemer sat, at sight of whom Mesa sprang up.

"I suppose you're satisfied now!" she cried, as she seemed on the eve of darting upon the youth, whose face wore a triumphant smile. "I thought I left you in Ponchin's care, but here you are."

"In at the death," laughed Tony. "It was a long lane, but it turned at last."

"How did you escape from Ponchin?"

"Never mind. I prefer to keep that as a secret."

"Keep it, then," growled Mesa, going back to her chair. "If I thought for a moment that Ponchin let you out I'd go over and throttle him."

"If the law would let you off," was the response. "By the way, I have a telegram that may interest you."

The boy shadow dived into one of his pockets and brought up a telegraph envelope which he extended to Mesa.

In another moment her eyes were devouring its contents, which ran as follows:

"TONY SHARP:—I have just forced Dick Dido to meet Ponchin. He would have escaped, but I held him to it. He turns out to be Ponchin's son by his first wife, but the Russian is willing to turn him over to be tried with Mesa for theft and conspiracy. The game for Old Skinner's money, and against your mother, has ended in victory—for us."

"BURT BOFFIN."

Having read the dispatch, Mesa threw it at the boy.

"I am in the trap," she admitted. "Well, I did the best I could. The bait was alluring and I thought I could get away with it. Do you know, young man, that Dick Dido is in love with that pretty sister of yours?"

Tony, the young shadow, burst into a laugh.

"He is not so deep in love as he was," he returned. "Do you know, Mesa, that Old Skinner will never sign another check?"

"He won't if you press him," answered Mesa.

"The papers which I hear you recovered last night are strong enough to drive the old sinner into the streets a beggar. They are the true deeds of the property he holds. He got his rise by false papers which were drawn up by Jabez Fleecer, the Philadelphia lawyer, and himself. The exact whereabouts of the true documents, your grandfather's will among them, has been a source of anxiety to Skinner, but when so many years had passed without bringing them to light he became satisfied that they would never appear to strip him. But, what does the old fellow say?"

"He don't say anything."

Mesa looked surprised.

"What! don't you know that Old Skinner is dead?" queried the boy.

The woman nearly sprung from her chair.

"Dead? Stephen Skinner dead?"

"Dead," echoed Tony.

"Did he—" she stopped and laughed at her own stammering. "Wasn't he found dead at his house?" she finished.

"You have not missed it, Mesa," said Tony. "Stephen Skinner was found dead on the floor of his library with a great heap of white ashes in his grate. Nobody knows what all he destroyed; but there is enough left for those who fought for their rights, and won the battle."

Mesa said no more, but turned her head away, and seemed to smile, as if one witness against her had been removed from her path.

In the course of time two important trials came off in the courts of New York.

One gave to Rebecca Sharp and her children the fortune which the Wall street Shark had appropriated to his own uses; the other rid the city of Mesa Marx and her friend, Dick Dido, the Broadway Statue.

We need not say that Tony Sharp was the proudest boy in Gotham, when he placed in his mother's hands a decision which righted a gigantic wrong, and not only gave her her long-lost inheritance, but also cleared the good name Old Skinner had tried so hard to smirch.

Helen, in time, became the wife of her lover, Lionel.

Burt Boffin, the detective, was liberally rewarded for his share in the good work, and Nina Copeland was not forgotten.

But, the real glory of the battle belonged to Tony. He had kept his promise to the Wall street Shark, making him pay in the end for his villainy.

THE END.

Beadle's Half-Dime Library.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

- 2 Yellowstone Jack; or, The Trapper.
- 48 Black John, the Road-Agent; or, The Outlaw's Retreat.
- 65 Hurricane Bill; or, Mustang Sam and His Pard.
- 119 Mustang Sam; or, The King of the Plains.
- 136 Night-hawk Kit; or, The Daughter of the Ranch.
- 144 Dainty Lance the Boy Sport.
- 151 Panther Paul; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.
- 160 The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.
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